SANE *journal*

sequential art narrative in education

2.2

SANE journal: Sequential Art Narrative in Education

Volume 2 | Issue 2 Article 1

April 2017

Using Superheroes to Visually and Critically Analyze Comics, Stereotypes, and Society

Mike P. Cook
Auburn University, mpc0035@auburn.edu

Ryle Frey
Millikin University, rafrey@millikin.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/sane

Part of the Curriculum and Instruction Commons, Educational Methods Commons, and the Visual Studies Commons

Recommended Citation
Cook, Mike P. and Frey, Ryle (2017) "Using Superheroes to Visually and Critically Analyze Comics, Stereotypes, and Society," *SANE journal: Sequential Art Narrative in Education*: Vol. 2 : Iss. 2 , Article 1.
Available at: http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/sane/vol2/iss2/1

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in SANE journal: Sequential Art Narrative in Education by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Using Superheroes to Visually and Critically Analyze Comics, Stereotypes, and Society

Introduction

Since the beginning of time, societies have often chronicled the lives of their most heroic. From Gilgamesh to Bilbo Baggins, many of the world's greatest tales follow the lives of legends and saviors. These incredible tales offer the reader a sense of the strength and nationalism found within the culture of a given society. For example, the cunning of Odysseus to escape Polyphemus, the courage and honor of Beowulf to take on all evil even in his old age, or the pride that Gilgamesh sees in his legacy, Uruk are all vital components of the respective cultural tenets. Therefore, these heroes are meant to be personifications of the land and people they represent. Just as Zeus, Thor, Gilgamesh, and Beowulf were the greatest heroes of their respective times and cultures and just as their stories are meant to resonate within their cultures, so too are heroes of our age (e.g., Batman and Superman). Comic books, in essence, serve as modern mythology (see for example, Hatfield, Heer, & Worcester, 2013; Klock, 2002; Reynolds, 2013; Reynolds, 1992).

Since their inception, comic book superheroes have served as cultural artifacts and representations of the times in which they were created. Superman, at least as we know him, appeared in 1933 at a time when Americans could use a heroic and patriotic figure. Captain America appeared in 1941 amidst the United States' involvement in World War II. Batman, similarly, made his initial appearance in 1939 on the heels of the Great Depression and the uncertainty over another global conflict.

The literature suggests, however, that comics have largely failed to adequately represent the society in which they were created. While the comics industry is moving in a positive

direction, readers require greater diversity of texts in which all readers can relate. While comics are at long last beginning to scratch the surface of diversity in America, it is important to help students understand the motivations behind this change. By doing this, teachers will not only help students to understand important literary elements, as listed in local and federal standards, in an engaging and pertinent manner, but they will also allow students the opportunity to find meaning in and valid applications for comics, and texts of all types, within their lives and their society. Accomplishing a task such as this within the classroom can help students to find relevancy within other mediums and to continue to search for knowledge in other unconventional, yet constructive ways.

Our Purpose and Connections to the Literature

Scholars have studied comics as a medium, from a variety of angles and through myriad lenses, for decades. Romagnoli and Pagnucci (2013), for example, suggested that wile comics are studied and discussed, the superhero comic genre is purposefully ignored. Similarly, McGrath (2007) suggested the need to analyze comics and heroes via sociological perspectives, such as race and ethnicity. It is this need to analyze comics that drives our work with students and the instruction we share through this paper. In our classrooms, we use these suggestions to guide the critical inquiry with which our students engage, and as such, we use comics to foster visual learning (Eisner, 1998; Fisher & Frey, 2004; McCloud, 1993; Serafini, 2011; Smetana, 2010) and critical thinking (Brenna, 2013; Chun, 2009; Krusemark, 2015; Serafini, 2014) and task students with explicitly examining comic book superheroes through these relevant social lenses. The review of the literature that follows is meant to frame the analytical experiences our students undertake. While a comprehensive review of relevant literature is far too complex to be adequately dealt with here and is thus outside the scope of this article, we have structured our

discussion by the categories of misrepresentation (society, stereotypes, gender, race and ethnicity, and sexuality) that we provide our students to guide their reading, discussions, and learning.

Our aim is to give our students (high school English language arts), and the students of readers of this article, the constructive and enlightening experience we have had with comic books while also presenting them with a sense of diversity. Thus, we have selected four comic books (*Gotham Central, The Shadow Hero, The Authority, and Ms. Marvel*) and characters (Renee Montoya, Green Turtle, Apollo and Midnighter, and Kamala Khan) that we feel offer engaging experiences as well as diverse ones that explore several heroes from various racial, cultural, and gender-related backgrounds. (1) Originally a character in *Batman: The Animated Series*, Renee Montoya (*Gotham Central*) is a Latina detective in Gotham City. She is eventually framed for murder and outed as a lesbian by Two-Face, tossing her life into chaos. (2) The Green Turtle (*The Shadow Hero*) made his first appearance in 1944 in Chu Hing's *Blazing Comics*. Green Turtle's origin is shrouded in mystery, but scholars argue that Hing's goal was to create a Chinese superhero. The character was reborn in *The Shadow Hero* miniseries, which offered an overtly Asian main character. (3) Created by Warren Ellis and Bryan Hitch, Apollo and Midnighter first appeared in *Stormwatch*. In 1999, the characters made the move to a new series, *The Authority*, where they became lovers and were eventually married. (4) G. Willow Wilson and Adrian Alphona created Kamala Khan, a Pakistani American, in 2014 as the first Muslim character to headline a Marvel publication (*Ms. Marvel*), where she assumed the role from the more widely-known Carol Danvers.

Our goal is to offer our students a fresh take on comic books not only by helping them find comics that represent cultures not often included in the comic book form, but also to inspire

them to subsequently use these experiences to analyze society and to become creators of new comics that offer neglected cultures a stake in the comic book medium. We use comic books for our purposes because they are an engaging way to integrate cultural diversity and acceptance into the classroom. We want students to not only comprehend and analyze the importance of visual literacy in their lives, but also the need to analyze the viewpoints of various different cultures and synthesize those cultures with their own. Through this unit, we provide students with various artifacts of American history, but in doing so we encourage them to question in what ways society has changed and what changes still need to occur.

Society

One way in which we ask students to consider comics and misrepresentation is through a social lens (i.e., society), and our students read all four comics in this pursuit. Traditionally, comics have not always provided representative looks at contemporary U.S. society. In fact, in the mid-1980s, Alan Moore stated in the preface to *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*:

> As anyone involved in fiction and its crafting over the past fifteen or so years would be delighted to tell you, heroes are starting to become rather a problem. They aren't what they used to be…or rather they *are*, and therein lies the heart of the difficulty. We demand new themes, new insights, new dramatic situations. We demand new heroes. (1986, p. 3)

For the most part, the archetypal superheroes (i.e., Batman, Captain America, Spider-Man, etc.) have been white males. Additionally, they have been honest, masculine, and so forth white males. To further complicate this notion, Brown (2001) wrote, "Like most other forms of North American mass media in the twentieth century, comic books have more or less managed to erase all evidence of cultural diversity" (p. 2). Traditionally (and even contemporarily), superheroes

have not adequately represented what American culture looks (or has looked) like. That said, there have been more recent efforts to address diversity. For example, Captain America has been reconceived as African American, Spider-Man is bi-racial, and Ms. Marvel is now a Pakistani American. Additionally, there have been some attempts made prior to these contemporary issues (e.g., Wein & Cockrum's, 1975, "Giant-Size X-Men #1). Many traditional superheroes, however, no longer cut it; our society continues to grow, to shift, and to look significantly different—comic book superheroes must follow suit.

Stereotypes

A second lens through which our students engage with the four texts to view comic superheroes is that of the stereotype. In addition to failing to adequately represent the society in which they exist, comic book superheroes also often perpetuate stereotypes and misrepresentations. These stereotypes can be seen in myriad ways, such as gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and so forth. Specifically, as McGrath (2007) argued, many comic book series continue to portray racial and gender stereotypes. Moreover, comparatively few comics include female and racially/ethnically/sexually diverse superheroes. Consequently, little research has been conducted to examine the intersection of these points of diversity in comic super-heroes/heroines. The remainder of this literature review will focus on explicating the categories of misrepresentations our students wrestle with and the relationships between comic superheroes and gender, race, ethnicity, and sexuality.

Gender

Yet another construct our students use to read the four comics and to analyze superheroes is gender, specifically visual representations of gender. One of the most frequently discussed aspects of comics, specifically with regard to stereotyping and accurate societal representation, is

that of gender and the superhero. McGrath (2007) pointed out an ongoing "underrepresentation, objectification, and sex-stereotyping of women…in comic books" (p. 271). Beginning in the 1980s, illustrators (largely male) began depicting superheroes, both male and female, with exaggerated sexual characteristics. Males, for example, were often drawn as having muscular, thick necks with comparatively smaller heads. Females were given long legs and large breasts and were often scantily clad to show off these characteristics (Robbins, 2002). As McGrath (2007) pointed out, superheroes were also given form-fitting outfits that accentuate the body. Perhaps part of this can be explained by looking at those who create the comics. Men continue to be responsible for comics (e.g., writers, artists, editors) and continue to outnumber women as characters. There are, however, beginning to be female comic writers who challenge and push against these norms by using their own stories and art to move in from the margins (Allison, 2014). It is also important to note a lack of scholarship in this area. Stabile (2009), for example, argued that many comic superheroes include overt sexism. Aside from this, few scholars have examined the relationships between gender in comic characters and power, sexuality, and so forth (Austin, 2015).

Race and Ethnicity

Through our study of comics and superheroes, we ask students to wrestle with a fourth category of misrepresentation—race and ethnicity. While this lens is utilized throughout our comics unit, students specifically apply this to Renee Montoya, Green Turtle, and Kamala Khan. In comics, topics and characters are reduced to *a* visual. These visuals are often superficial and stereotyped. This is especially true for the characters in superhero comics. Comic books, specifically those with superheroes, have served as historic and ongoing locations for stereotypical renderings of race and ethnicity, and the superhero genre itself has a "long history

of excluding, trivializing, or 'tokenizing' minorities" in numerous superheroes (Singer, 2002, p. 107). Furthermore, ethnic identity, while presented in varied ways, continues to draw from stereotypes (McGrath, 2007). Conversely, those that do not utilize stereotypes often exacerbate the issue by creating what Singer termed an "equally unrealistic invisibility" (p. 107). While contemporary issues continue to push back against these stereotypes, there remains an atmosphere of historical stereotype reaffirmation.

Sexuality

Lastly, an important component of social analysis is the spectrum of sexuality; thus, we utilize the study of superheroes to foster this analytical thought in students, especially with regard to Apollo and Midnighter. Compared to previous decades, there are currently more LGBTQ content in comics. Palmer-Mehta and Hay (2005) argued that LGBTQ issues have "been increasingly explored by industry leaders, DC and Marvel, since the late 1980s" (p. 390), but these were mostly in supporting and more minor roles. Greyson (2007) also stated that many comics containing LGBTQ characters have historically not been from the large publishing houses, but have instead been self-published or through independent publishers. Others (see for example, McAllister, Sewell, & Gordon, 2001) have pointed to the benefit (and necessity) for analyzing comics and comic characters in a variety of ways (e.g., queer theory, LGTBQ, and so forth).

In 1994, a "Doonesbury" cartoon drew attention to the issues of homosexuality and gay marriage by taking a humorous shot at the typical religious and societal stance of homosexuality as being abnormal and being a sin (Preston, 1994). Almost twenty years later, Neil Gaiman's *Sandman* included characters who "normalize queerness," which Brisbin and Booth (2013) defined as someone who "does not conform to the gender norms informed by a masculine-

feminine binary, which rests on a presumed heterosexuality (and heteronormativity)" (p. 22). In this way, *Sandman* is one of the few comics that, rather than reinforcing stereotypes, contradicts them. This, however, is not the norm in a comics industry that has regularly stereotyped many minorities and issues of diversity.

Analyzing Visual Narratives

In order to help students analyze contemporary comic book heroes and to ultimately make meaningful connections to the society in which they live, we introduce students to an instructional unit that utilizes four comics as the anchor texts. As part of this, students begin by analyzing individual images. This allows us to assist students in practicing and developing foundational visual literacy skills (e.g., analyzing, questioning, and interpreting images) and to guide students through conversations and group activities. Moreover, this serves as an opportunity to ease students into the social-critiques and analytical lenses that drive this unit (society, stereotypes, gender, race and ethnicity, and sexuality). It is only after these experiences that we ask students to apply their newly acquired skills as they read and analyze entire comic book narratives. The unit itself culminates in a project allowing students to compose their own visuals (i.e., depictions of heroes) that they feel adequately represent their society. As mentioned above, we utilize this four-week unit, designed to allow students to consider and discuss a variety of issues through the lens of comic narratives, with high school ELA students.

Ultimately, the purpose of this unit is to provide students opportunities to rethink the stereotypes that they, and others, have and the roles the media and society play in promoting and/or perpetuating these beliefs. As we read and discuss each comic, students make connections to advertisements, mass media, politics, social movements, U.S. and world events, and much more. Throughout the unit, students are required to ask complex and sometimes very personal

questions (e.g., What stereotypes do I hold, and where did they originate? How do I disrupt these personal beliefs and truths?) and to begin rethinking both themselves and the world. To help students go beyond simply reading and discussing our comics and to assist them in taking critical stances on relevant social issues, we also engage students in applying all that they have discussed, realized, and learned by composing their own interpretations of society—their own visual representations of heroes that well-represent the society in which they live.

Reading Static Comic Images

Before asking students to read and make meaning from entire comic books, we first have them look at single images from those texts they will later analyze. This is important to us for a variety of reasons. Given that the ultimate goal of this unit is to help students begin to analyze superheroes and to connect those heroes to the society in which we live, they must first wrestle with individual heroes and whether or not they feel those heroes adequately or accurately represent the U.S. We begin this unit by engaging students in small group and whole class discussions that require them to start thinking about and attempting to define 'hero' and the characteristics that they feel accurately represent the United States. Throughout this process, we want students to recognize that the concept of 'the hero' is often fluid and as Jung pointed out, unique and individualized, and doesn't have to represent a specific archetype or stereotype. In fact, we aim to discuss heroes that represent multiple aspects of the world around us. As such, we also want students to recognize, and then discuss, that comic books, historically, have not always done a good job of accurately representing society.

As part of the unit, students will read and dissect four comic book superheroes, beginning with static images of each and then transitioning to reading the narrative as a whole. First, we introduce students to *Gotham Central* and Renee Montoya. Next, students examine The Green

Turtle. Third, we look at Apollo and Midnighter in *The Authority*. And finally, students read *Ms. Marvel*, where they analyze Kamala Khan. It is worth noting here that these are not the only texts valuable for this type of instructional approach. In fact, the use of other titles might help students to look at heroes and society in alternative and important ways. To select the texts discussed here, we compiled a list of comics and heroes with which we were familiar and that we felt would foster critical thinking and conversations in our students and then narrowed them to ensure they each offered students a unique look at the concepts that drive our unit.

Rather than simply asking students to view these images and to begin making relevant meaning from them, we provide students with levels of scaffolding: working in groups and utilizing a list of prompts/questions to guide their analysis. We make the decision to put students into groups for three main reasons. First, all students come to this project with different experiences and perspectives. While many students are familiar with the comic book superheroes of the big screen, most report never having read a comic book. Second, any social critique should involve a dialogue—this is no different. Third, students tend to grow as learners through meaningful collaboration. The handout used to guide students' analyses is intended to focus their attention and to foster the visual analysis skills necessary to evaluate the societal implications of any visual they encounter. The handout reads as follows:

> As you *read* the excerpted images from each of these comics, discuss and provide a response to each of the prompts/questions below:
>
> - Describe what the hero looks like.
> - What are your initial thoughts?
> - What similarities do you see between heroes?
> - What differences do you see?

- Are any/all of these heroes representative of our society? How so?

These prompts are meant to serve as guides only. Students can and will make their own connections and utilize their own perspectives. Thus, a range of ideas, questions, and responses may ensue. This, however, is one of the positive side effects of this approach. We want students to practice asking questions of texts and forming their own interpretations. Likewise, students will certainly pick out ideas that we never considered, fostering a productive discussion and helping us all to learn on a daily basis. For example, when discussing *Gotham Central,* one student asked why Montoya's hair appears somewhat disheveled in the image (below), sparking an interesting conversation about the societal expectations on women to meet a pre-defined appearance. With that said, we always enter this unit with a list of specific prompts, guiding questions, and examples that can assist students in getting started, especially if this is the first time they have been asked to analyze static and narrative images. Below, we provide a discussion of the excerpts we use with students, along with a few points of interest that we think students should note. These are certainly not meant to represent the entirety of the topics of discussion possible within this unit, but are instead only designed to offer educators a glimpse into our pedagogical approach(es).

Rene Montoya. The first image we provide students is from *Gotham Central*, "Half a Life, Part 2" (vol. 1, issue 7, 2003). Using this image of Renee Montoya, who is cast in shadow and holding a firearm (see Figure 1), we begin by focusing students' attention on the use of color. We want them to note the dark tone and the high contrast within the image. Our students discuss a variety of ideas here, such as how the artist has included a generous amount of black and blue, which helps provide readers visual context about this character. Here we ask students to note the black as representative of what Montoya has been hiding from the world and the blue

as evoking a feeling of loneliness. This suggests the seriousness of the situation at hand, as well as emits a mysterious vibe. As readers, we are meant to feel what Montoya is feeling. The shadow cast across half her face shows us that she doesn't know everything about the situation she is in. Part of it is still a mystery (to readers as well), leaving her uncertain (i.e., shrouded in doubt).

Figure 1: Renee Montoya

Next, we guide students to the character (Montoya herself) in the image, as we want them to begin noticing how revealing visual characterizations can be. In this image, our eyes are drawn to her face. We ask students to notice that only half of Montoya's face is illuminated, suggesting she is hiding something or that we, as readers, are only seeing one side of her. In other words, we are only seeing "Half a Life." It is also important to note her gun. Montoya is a character with no superpowers; thus, she must use outside tools to achieve her goals. Given that we only see the right side of her face, and the fact that she holds her gun in her right hand, we can infer that the side of herself she allows to be seen by the world (and by readers) is her police force side. As readers, we along with the rest of Gotham, see a hard detective whose passion is connected to law and order. Throughout the comic, and the story arc, however, students will begin to see what is hidden on Montoya's other side.

Apollo and Midnighter. The second image we show students is taken from *The Authority*, "The Circle" (vol. 1, issue 2, 1999). In this image (see Figure 2), we are presented with two superheroes, Apollo and Midnighter, who each stand out in their own ways. Here, they work as a kind of yin and yang, as both heroes fight crime but do so using very different methods. Apollo, the brightly colored hero, delivers justice using conventional super-heroics

Figure 2: Apollo and Midnighter

(i.e., busting the bad guys and delivering them to the authorities). Conversely, Midnighter is more non-traditional in his approach to crime fighting. He utilizes threats, torture, and dirty fighting to achieve his goals. Both of these heroes, however, work together by offering a system of checks and balances. Midnighter, it can be argued, might be a villain without the interference of Apollo, and Apollo could be too soft on villains without Midnighter to remind him of the justice that is due. This is a common trope in superhero comics, but it works well here to paint a visual of two seemingly opposite characters.

To help students *see* this for themselves, we guide their attention to the use of color. We point out that Apollo appears to have a halo of light around his head, while Midnighter is enveloped in the black of his mask and cape. This provides an opportunity to help students think about the connection between the images they see and the alphabetic texts they read. After a conversation about their appearance and physical attributes, we ask students if it changes their opinions to know that these two characters are in fact lovers. Without fail, this initially surprises students, as they do not feel these two characters look like any stereotypical homosexual male often presented in the media. Here, we ask students to think about the ways in which the writer and artist have broken down barriers by presenting a Superman-esque and a Batman-esque character as lovers. From this image, students begin thinking and talking about why our society and media might paint such an obscure and inaccurate image of gay men (e.g., can a gay man be "manly?").

Kamala Khan. The third superhero we ask students to visually analyze is Ms. Marvel. To do this, we use *Ms. Marvel* (vol. 1, issue 1, 2014). Unlike *Gotham Central* and *The Authority*, we provide students with three static images from this comic. Using these three images, students are able to compare and contrast the several differences between the original Ms. Marvel, Carol Danvers (Figure 3), and the new Ms. Marvel, Kamala Khan, at two stages of her superhero development (Figures 4 and 5). The image of Carol Danvers represents an often used stereotype of the traditional female superhero. We ask students to note the relationship between the image and the pressures media and society place on women: blonde hair, blue eyes, big chest, exuding confidence, and so forth.

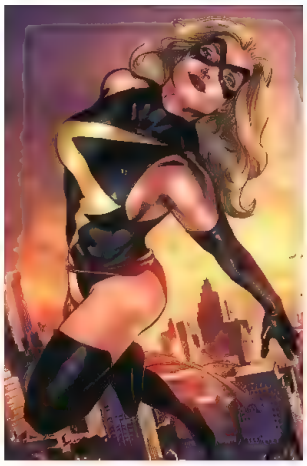


Figure 3: Original Ms. Marvel

Figure 4: Kamala Khan Early in Career

To contrast this image, we ask students to view the two images of Kamala Khan. They note that the first image of Khan (Figure 4) parallels the first image in the similarity of the two outfits. What we also want them to note is that, while Kamala is dressed like Carol, she appears to lack the confidence and physical attributes; students discuss her posture and the angle at which she is holding her arms, suggesting an uncertainty with exactly what has happened and who she is. The societal parameters often placed on women are not as present in this image. When looking at the other image of Khan (Figure 5), however, students can note that she is

Figure 5: Kamala Khan Later in Career

still capable of being confident, although it looks quite different than in the image of Danvers; here, for example, students often point out her more powerful stance and body language, her clinched fists, and her upward-flowing cape. While there are several concepts students can pull from this image, we guide them to examine the artist's suggestion that the traditional norm for women (i.e., white, curvy, blonde) is not the only type on which a hero can be based. Instead, our students work together in small groups to discuss the idea that a hero can come from anywhere and can be absolutely anyone.

Green Turtle. The final superhero we share with students is the Green Turtle. To get to know this character, students view an image (see Figure 6) from Gene Yang's (2014) *The Shadow Hero*. One of the first things students point out is the use of color. The majority of color used in the image is green, which students believe suggests his inherent goodness. We also point out to students that the use of green can also connote a connection to the natural world (e.g., a turtle). That is, he is not supernatural. When discussing color, students also note that his red collar stands out. This is another clue to readers that he is not simply a hero, but he is a good person. The black in the background represents his shadow, which envelopes him, which lets readers know there is another side to him and that there is something other characters are unaware of (i.e., Green Turtle has a secret; in this case, his shadow protects him from bullets).

Figure 6: The Green Turtle

When discussing this image, students also bring up his cape, sparking a discussion of its dominance of and overall placement in the image. In contrast to the more traditional superheroes,

Green Turtle's body is hidden by his cape, which students often enjoy discussing (e.g., Why do we not see his build? What is the artist hiding from us?). In other words, the artists have not explicitly drawn attention to his physical build. Here, we want students to note the importance of this and to begin thinking about how and why his appearance does not parallel more traditional visuals of superheroes. Without fail, students also mention the image of the turtle on the cape. The turtle is not a fast, agile, or impressive animal, but turtles are thought of as wise. Turtles also often represent innocence, endurance, persistence, and success against formidable odds. These concepts tell readers quite a bit about who the Green Turtle is as a person and how he approaches crime-fighting.

A word on assessment. Before discussing how and why we engage students with transitioning from reading individual images to comic narratives, it is important to acknowledge the varying levels of assessment taking place throughout the aforementioned activities. First, collecting group responses to the prompts on the handout offer teachers a two layered assessment: after reading each individual image and after reading subsequent images and considering their meanings taken together. Additionally, as is true with all group work, teachers can engage in quality informal assessment through interacting with and listening to each group. Third, through frequent class discussions about students' experiences with and between images, the teacher can formatively assess growth as well as any necessary additional support needed. Finally, after reading and discussing the final image, we ask the groups to craft a group statement; as part of this activity, each group works together to respond to three questions: what did we learn; what questions do we still have; and now that we have seen all four images, how do we define or characterize the concept of 'superhero'? This assessment method offers students the opportunity to reflect, rethink, and report on their learning. While these represent the methods of

assessment we utilize, there are numerous other options; Bitz (2010) and Yang (2003), among others, offer teachers a variety of resources and rubrics for use in an instructional unit based on comics. As such, we would encourage teachers to experiment with their own assessment methods after first determining the learning objectives they most value as part of this approach.

Reading Comic Narratives

After providing students with multiple opportunities to engage with individual comic images and to begin thinking about and discussing the ways in which these superheroes are (or are not) representative of the society in which we live, we transition to reading comic narratives. To further the analysis students have already done, we bring in issues that contain the static superhero images previously viewed. Rather than only consider each of these heroes out of context, we believe it is important to analyze the characters within the setting, within the story, and within their world. Only then can students truly begin to understand who these people are and how they fit within our lives.

For this component of the unit, students continue to read in groups, as we continue to utilize discussion and team analysis. In contrast to our approach to the individual images, we allow each group to choose the order they read the comics (e.g., one group may choose to read *Gotham Central* first, while another group may begin with *The Shadow Hero*) because we are more interested in the culminating learning than in any one character or narrative. Similar to the previous group work, as students read, they continue to engage in conversations and collaborative writing by responding to another set of prompts:

In your small groups, read each comic and respond to the following prompts:

- Describe the hero.
- Describe the ways you connect (or cannot connect, perhaps) to the hero.

- Is this hero representative of you, your life, and/or your society?
- Compose a closing statement representing your learning and the evolution of your group's definition of superhero.

In addition to the prompts provided above, each group is responsible for crafting a group statement after reading each comic: how did this comic contribute to your definition of superhero? Finally, after reading all four comics, we ask groups to work together to craft a closing statement that addresses the following questions:

- What have you learned?
- What questions do you still have?
- How have these comics helped you define superhero?
- How have these comics worked together and combined to further your definition of superhero and your analysis of the heroes' connection to society?

Gotham Central. Below are excerpts from the comics we use with students and a discussion of concepts we want students to note. One of the texts students read is *Gotham Central*, volume 1, issue 7 (2003). Reading *Gotham Central*, students are introduced to a strong female character, one with no super powers. Here students can consider the portrayal of gender roles and whether or not they parallel societal expectations. In addition to discussing gender, students are required to analyze Montoya's ethnicity and what role that plays in her experiences and in our world. Moreover, through the story students realize that Montoya is gay. This can trigger meaningful conversations of stereotypes and social perceptions. For example, students often feel that while Montoya has the visual appearance of a Hispanic woman—they often point out her skin tone and hair color—she does not fit within the visual stereotypes they feel are held by society (e.g., married young, mother and caregiver).

One page we often focus students' attention is provided in Figure 7. When interacting with this sequence of panels, we focus students on the lighting by drawing their attention to the warm colors, such as orange and yellow. This presents an environment of acceptance and comfort. In contrast, the darker colors (e.g., blue and purple) can represent coldness and judgment. As we discuss these panels, students may argue that based on the dark colors used on Montoya and Dee's clothing, we can assume these women have learned to adapt to the hatred they encounter and to hide who they truly are by cloaking themselves in the same kind of cold colors as the world around them. This page presents the two stepping out of this cold and unaccepting environment in which they typically live to come together to find solace and affirmation.

Figure 7: Color in *Gotham Central*

Figure 8: Relationship in *Gotham Central*

We also guide students to use the images provided to analyze the two characters. Where the two are sitting also presents a clue to their relationship. Here, students note that Montoya and Dee are sitting side by side, which tells us they are very close. Additionally, students point to the bottom left panel. Through the act of holding hands and character placement, readers can see that these two are intimate. In other words, students recognize that they love each other

without having to actually use the words.

In addition to the characters, we ask students to discuss the use of lighting throughout the comic. As part of our conversations, students discuss the fact that the lighting changes and reverts back to the cold, uncomfortable colors when the characters return to Gotham, suggesting that they must again hide who they are. At this point in the story (shown in Figure 8), Montoya has already been exposed and is just beginning to accept who she is. We see this in the way the artist portrays them as leaning on one another in the bottom right panel.

This is a great moment for students to analyze both character development and societal connections and ties in well with the next page (see Figure 9), where readers get a better understanding of what the dark colors represent. When discussing this page, students notice the crude dialogue, and the character placement, between Montoya and Lipari, presenting these two characters as at odds. From the insults Lipari throws at Montoya, who clenches her fists, readers see exactly what Gotham gives to Montoya and just how unaccepting people in the city (e.g., Lipari) can be. This provides us an opportunity to help students consider the incredible contrasts present in this comic. The bottom right panel contrasts well with the hand holding image in Figure 7. With this image, we are provided a transition from the idea of love to the concept being grotesque.

Figure 9: Use of Dark Color in *Gotham Central*

The Shadow Hero. Students also read chapters one and two from *The Shadow Hero* (Yang, 2014) and examine the portrayal of race and ethnicity in comic heroes. In *The Shadow*

Hero, readers are presented with a non-white male superhero, a concept that has not been traditional in American comics. Green Turtle is in many ways an average man, someone who just wants to make a difference. He does not have any "super" powers himself, but he is protected by his shadow (an external force), suggesting outside help which (1) departs from tradition and (2) is more relatable to student readers. Reading this text also allows students to question the concept of identity and what it really means to be "an American." Because the hero of the story is first generation Asian American, it requires us to go beyond an analysis of the text and character to also analyze ourselves (e.g., our beliefs) and our social makeup.

While reading this text, many students mention the use of gender throughout the comic. For example, when looking at the two pages shown in Figure 10, they often question the portrayal of the "hero." In this sequence, the Green Turtle, who is just experimenting with being a hero, is crouched down in the forefront of the image, while an attractive female saves him from a group of thugs. This, our students note, contrasts traditional notions of heroes and of portrayals of superheroes in comics. In these discussions, our students often prompt each other with engaging questions (e.g., Who is the hero of this scene? What does it say about him to be saved by a girl? Does the time period in which this is set affect how important these portrayed gender roles are?). Generally in comic stories, the male superhero would save the girl, but he is incapable at this point.

Figure 10: Shadow Hero Two-Page Spread

Moreover, the top right panel on the second page again reverses traditional gender roles in comics. We find this important to point out to students; thus, we guide them through the page. While we do notice an attraction between the two, the superhero appears bruised and bloody and is depicted beneath his female rescuer, a visual way for the artist to make her the more powerful character in the scene. Additionally, after the fight has concluded, she helps Green Turtle to a car, a car driven by his mother.

Figure 11: Shadow Hero Fight Scene

In keeping with our discussion of the connection between superheroes and fighting, we ask students to also consider Figure 11. This sequence of panels offers a fight scene more closely aligned with superhero comics. In it, our hero confronts the bad guy; however, for the one punch he lands, he is injured twice (scratched in this case) by his opponent. Students state that generally, we do not witness superheroes getting hurt in day to day fights, but the artist shows readers that Green Turtle is human. He is flesh and blood (with no superpowers).

Figure 12: Green Turtle and Mother

In the final panel, we see the hero resorting to a weapon to protect himself. Given that the bad guy in this scene is unarmed, we know the hero has moved beyond simply defeating a nemesis to self-preservation. Our students find this an interesting notion, as they feel it completely flies in the face of what they assumed. To further this point, we discuss that in many traditional comic

fight scenes, it is the bad guy who uses a weapon on the hero, thus taking away the idea of a fair fight.

In our work with *The Shadow Hero*, we also talk about the relationships between Green Turtle, his heritage, and his mother and the fact that there is nothing super about him. In the panel shown in Figure 12, we discuss who he is. In this image, we are shown that he is a normal young man. He is not rich. He does not appear to be special in any way. Instead, he has his mother. These discussions continue as we look at Figures 13 and 14. These two panels depict Green Turtle on his way to fight crime. He does not have the power of flight, and he does not have the ability to quickly traverse the city. Instead, on the first page (Figure 13), we see him being driven around by his mother, who wears the mast to protect her identity when he does not. This, in some ways, suggests she lacks faith in him and is not sure she wants to be associated with any failure he might endure. In the second panel (Figure 14), our hero takes public transportation. This tells us he is a common, working class man. It also suggests that he is not different than anyone else in that city or on that bus.

Figure 13: Riding with Mom

Figure 14: Riding the Bus

The Authority. Another comic students read as part of this unit is *The Authority*. We ask students to read this text for a variety of reasons. Among these are that this comic allows students to first note and discuss the many stereotypes of masculinity and traditional superheroes that

arise. As they continue to read, students find out that Apollo and Midnighter are lovers, which prompts quality discussion of existing social stereotypes and assumptions of homosexuals, especially homosexual males and the ways in which these two characters contradict those and require us to rethink the concept.

While reading, students note the use of gender roles. In Figure 15, the idea of traditional gender roles is challenged. In these panels, Apollo and Midnighter each play multiple "roles" and therefore make these gender roles neutral. Throughout the page, Midnighter is visually portrayed as above Apollo. In other words, Midnighter is in the more dominant position. When discussing this scene, students often notice that Midnighter is holding Apollo, which they feel is symbolic of dominance; moreover, Apollo is in the lower, more vulnerable position.

YOU WATCHING FRIENDS?
IS IT "THE ONE WHERE CHUCK GETS ON YOUR NERVES" OR "THE ONE WHERE YOU REALIZED THEY'RE ALL THIRTY FIVE AND ACTUALLY A NOT IF BRENT"
I'M NOT WATCHING TELEVISION
SO WHAT AVE JUNO
ABOUT WHAT?
THINKING
ABOUT HOW I'M GOING BACK EVERY BONE IN THAT CLOWN'S BODY AND SHOVE HIS FEMINCY MACE SO FAR HE'S GOING TO NEED EIGHT YEARS PHYSIO THERAPY AND A GOOD PROCTOLOGIST TO WALK AGAIN
GOD I AM IN LOVE YOU SOMETIMES

Figure 15: Gender Roles in *The Authority*

To further student discussion, we ask them to look at Apollo's body language. Based on the way he holds his body (e.g., arms crossed, face squinted), students define him as reserved and perhaps uninterested in the unfolding scene. In contrast to the discussion of Midnighter, Apollo's attitude appears to set him apart from the scene, rather than addressing his vulnerability.

Through the combination of these panels, Midnighter seems to be vying for Apollo's attention. This visually suggests that both characters are simultaneously vulnerable and dominant. Additionally, in the end we see both characters facing the same direction, both looking

toward the future. From this panel, students often point out that they are displayed at relatively equal heights and as accepting one another into their individual comfort zones. Contrasting this scene with traditional notions of males and masculinity, our students mention that the dynamic between these two men is something they assume to be shared by a man and a woman. These panels, thus, help students begin to break down the stereotypes they hold; furthermore, it allows students to analyze the author and artist's intent to question the status quo by composing a scene that requires readers to rethink the concepts of gender and "normal."

Ms. Marvel. The final comic students read as part of this unit is *Ms. Marvel*. This comic provides opportunities for our students to discuss gender and ethnicity through a very intriguing character. This text is unique in that it forces students to go beyond their own society by analyzing the world. Kamala Khan and her family are Muslim and much of the story is driven by this concept. Within this text, students are provided a snapshot into the life of an average American Muslim. More importantly perhaps, Kamala's family and story are relevant to many of the things going on around the world.

Figure16: Stereotypes in Kamala Khan

While student conversations cover many panels and pages, we always draw students' attention to Figure 16. We ask them to notice how Kamala transforms into a blue-eyed blonde when being heroic. As part of this, they ask themselves two questions. Is this Kamala's view of what a hero looks like? And is this the illustrators commenting on society's perceptions?

One of the concepts students point out is Kamala's powers. They are not elegant like the previous Ms. Marvel,

who had super strength, super endurance, and flight. Instead, she is able to contort her body and stretch her limbs. This provides another opportunity to question societal pressures. The media often portray characteristics such as big hands and lankiness as unattractive, especially in women.

In the bottom panel, the author and artist show Kamala as human and as mortal. Without including a gun, the visual leaves no doubt that she has been shot. When we ask students to explain how they know this, they point out her grimace, her furrowed brow, and her blank stare. Likewise, they mention that the text itself plays a key role here with "Blam!" in block letters. These work together to show readers that she has been hit with something more extreme than in the previous panels. It shows us that she is not indestructible. It shows us that she can be hurt like the rest of us.

Composing—the Culminating Project

After students have engaged in ongoing conversations about these superheroes as presented in static images and comic narratives, we want them to begin to make sense of these experiences for themselves. Throughout the unit, our students have debated the connections between various superheroes and themselves and their society. To bring this full-circle, we ask students to compose a visual representation of a superhero relevant to their own lives. To facilitate this, we provide students the following assignment prompt:

> For this project, you will use all you have learned and thought about throughout this unit to compose a visual that you feel represents *your* definition of 'superhero' and our society. In other words, drawing on your experiences reading, responding to, and discussing a variety of comic book superheroes, you will visually depict a hero you feel best portrays the diversity that is our country. You may create either a sequential visual or

a collage visual representation—the choice is yours. You can create your own images if you fee so inspired; conversely, you can incorporate existing images, but you must appropriately cite any image you utilize. Upon completion, you will also compose and submit a reflection to accompany your project. In it, you will describe the rhetorical decisions you made and how you utilized the visual medium to help others *see* how you (1) define superhero and (2) have made meaning from these experiences.

After crafting their compositions, students then return to their groups and analyze the images they have created, in much the same way they analyzed the superheroes throughout this unit. This serves multiple purposes. First, it acknowledges the importance of student created texts by asking them to apply the same critical lenses they utilize with other pieces of literature. Second, it helps students transition from critiquing comic characters to their (and their classmates') interpretations of society. Third, it extends student learning and helps them to see that critical thought is not simply a classroom construct but is a tool that is vital to their lives (i.e., being a contributing citizen requires asking questions of and analyzing the society in which we are members). While the benefits and possibilities go on and on, these three offer what we feel is a compelling rationale for this approach.

Conclusion

The purpose of this article is to present teachers with a rationale for and approach to harnessing the power of superheroes and comic books in (multi)literacy instruction. In addition, as an important goal of literacy educators is to encourage the analysis and application of the components that make up the Language Arts within our students, then it is necessary that this task be accomplished in a way that allows students worthwhile, relevant, and thorough experiences. Therefore, we suggest that achieving these educational ends is not only possible

using the comic book medium, but it is also vital for teachers to provide students with carefully designed opportunities to interact and engage with multimodal texts such as comics.

It is important to note, however, that as this medium and method of consuming text may be new to students, teachers must provide their students guidance and multiple opportunities to read and discuss comic and graphic texts, to recognize and wrestle with these social issues upon which we have elaborated, and to develop the skills necessary for fully-literate citizenship. As much as we would love to teach solely on the topic of comic books, their creation, and their history (and we could), we believe it is important for us to take students further. As such, it is vital that teachers who utilize this framework take the time to model social analysis and criticism for their students; additionally, teachers must provide their students with the ample opportunity to consider and develop their own critical stances; in our unit, we utilize small group discussions and guiding prompts to facilitate and help students develop these analytical and critical thinking skills. Lastly it is necessary to frame similar units with appropriate essential questions (e.g., How are identities formed and shaped? Given how we are constantly bombarded with "what a hero should be," how might one form a heroic identity that is authentic and true to their society?) to allow for a focus on diversity, social issues, and ethnic equality rather than the comic book medium as a whole.

That said, teachers who use this approach must give their students the proper tools to effectively make meaning from the information received through multiple modes (e.g., images and text). This calls for a need to provide students with previous experience in visual literacy. Our approach offers students the opportunity to use their prior knowledge of visual literacy by applying it to a variety to texts, topics, and social issues. We also encourage teachers to familiarize their students with multimodal texts and the comic format prior to implementing this

approach. Our unit, and any educational use for comics, demands more from students than simply reading and writing traditional text and thinking in traditional ways. In order for students to gain the most from this interaction with comic characters, they must first be conversant with the comics medium, with multimodality, and with visual rhetoric. Following these same suggestions, we have experienced success implementing this unit with students and helping them to appreciate and construct meaning from the chemistry created through the pairing of text and images. That is, our students demonstrate an ability to engage in analysis, critique, and discussions of complex issues (e.g., race, gender, sexuality) relevant to their lives, report increased confidence in visual analysis, and perceive themselves to be better equipped to turn a critical eye to the society (including the representative heroes) in which they live.

In recent years, these issues of racism and sexism have been at the forefront of the social consciousness and discourse. Reports of these injustices continue to fill news reports on a global scale. In other words, students today require and hunger for opportunities to make connections to the world around them and to contribute in personal ways. Implementing this unit in classrooms has allowed us to guide students through the difficult world of critical text, self, and social analysis and has assisted our students in wrestling with these complex issues. This suggests to us that issues of equity and the desire to positively impact the world is on the minds of young adults. Through the use of multimodality, students can engage in deep discussions and debates of the important social issues they read about. Providing students diverse texts, such as the ones we have described, opens this line of communication and helps students develop the skills to analyze the world and the voice to change it. Furthermore, and in the interest of full disclosure, we love comics.

References

Allison, M.C. (2014). (Not) lost in the margins: Gender and identity in graphic texts. *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature, 47*(4), 73-97.

Austin, S. (2015). Batman's female foes: The gender war in Gotham City. *Journal of Popular Culture, 48*(2), 285-295.

Barron, D.D. (1991). Zap! pow! What!: Comics, graphic novels, and education. *School Library Media Activities Monthly, 8*(3), 48-50.

Bongco, M. (2013). *Reading comics: Language, culture, and the concept of the superhero in comic books*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Brenna, B. (2013) How graphic novels support reading comprehension strategy development in children. *Literacy, 47*(2), 88-94.

Brisbin, A. & Booth, P. (2013). The Sand/wo/man: The unstable worlds of gender in Neil Gaiman's Sandman series. *Journal of Popular Culture, 46*(1), 20-37.

Bitz, M. (2010). *When commas meet Kryptonite: Lessons from the comic book project*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Brown, J.A. (2001). *Black superheroes, milestone comics, and their fans*. Oxford, MS: University of Mississippi Press.

Chun, C.W. (2009). Critical literacies and graphic novels for English-language learners: Teaching Maus. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy, 53*(2), 144-153.

Eisner, E.W. (1998). *The kind of schools we need: Personal essays*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Ellis, W., Millar, M., Hitch, B., & Quitely, F. (1999). The circle: Part 2. *The Authority, 1*(2). La Jolla, CA: WildStorm Productions.

Fisher, D. & Frey N. (2004). Using graphic novels, anime, and the internet in an urban high school. *English Journal, 93*(3), 19-25.

Greyson, D. (2007). GLBTQ content in comics/graphic novels for teens. *Collection Building, 26*(4), 130-134.

Hatfield, C., Heer, J., & Worcester, K. (2013). *The superhero reader*. Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press.

Klock, G. (2002). *How to read superhero comics and why*. New York, NY: Continuum.

Krusemark, R. (2015). The role of critical thinking in reader perceptions of leadership in comic books. *SANE Journal: Sequential Art Narrative in Education, 2*(1).

McAllister, M.P., Sewell Jr., E.H., & Gordon, I. (2001). *Comics and ideology*. New York, NY: Peter Lang.

McCloud, S. (1993). *Understanding comics: The invisible art*. New York, NY: William Morrow.

McGrath, K. (2007). Gender, race, and Latina identity: An examination of Marvel Comics' *Amazing Fantasy* and *Arana*. *Atlantic Journal of Communication, 15*(4), 268-283.

Moore, A. (1986). *Batman: The dark knight returns*. New York, NY: DC Comics.

Palmer-Mehta, V. & Hay, K. (2005). A superhero for gays? Gay masculinity and Green Lantern. *Journal of Popular Culture, 28*(4), 390-404.

Preston, B. (1994). 'Doonesbury' draws attention to new book on same-sex unions. *National Catholic Reporter, 30*(33), 5.

Reynolds, R. (1992). Superheroes: A modern mythology. London: Batsford.

Robbins, T. (2002). Gender differences in comics. *Image & Narrative, 4*.

Romagnoli, A.S. & Pagnucci, G.S. (2013). *Enter the superheroes: American values, culture, and the canon of superhero literature*. Plymouth, UK: Scarecrow Press, Inc.

Rucka, G. & Lark, M. (2003). Half a life: Part 2. *Gotham Central, 1*(7). Burbank, CA: DC Comics.

Serafini, F. (2011). Expanding perspectives for comprehending visual images in multimodal texts. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy, 54*(5), 342-350.

Serafini, F. (2014). *Reading the visual: An introduction to teaching multimodal literacy*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Singer, M. (2002). "Black skins" and white masks: Comic books and the secret of race. *African American Review, 36*(1), 107-119.

Smetana, L. (2010). Graphic novel gurus: Students with learning disabilities enjoying real literature. *The California Reader, 44*(1), 3-14.

Stabile, C.A. (2009). "Sweetheart, this ain't gender studies": Sexism and superheroes. *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies, 6*(1), 86-92.

Wein, L. & Cockrum, D. (1975). *Giant-size X-Men #1, 1*(1). New York, NY: Marvel.

Willow, G.W., Alphona, A., & Herring, I. (2014). Part one of five: Meta morphosis. *Ms. Marvel, 1*(1). New York, NY: Marvel.

Yang, G.L. (2014). *The shadow hero*. New York, NY: First Second.

Yang, G.L. (2003). Comics in education. Retrieved from http://www.geneyang.com/comicsedu/

SANE journal: Sequential Art Narrative in Education

Volume 2 | Issue 2 Article 2

April 2017

Teaching Critical Looking: Pedagogical Approaches to Using Comics as Queer Theory

Ashley Manchester
University of Florida, manchester@ufl.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/sane

Part of the American Literature Commons, American Popular Culture Commons, Art Education Commons, Curriculum and Instruction Commons, Educational Assessment, Evaluation, and Research Commons, Educational Methods Commons, Higher Education Commons, Illustration Commons, Interdisciplinary Arts and Media Commons, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Studies Commons, Other Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons, Rhetoric and Composition Commons, and the Visual Studies Commons

Recommended Citation
Manchester, Ashley (2017) "Teaching Critical Looking: Pedagogical Approaches to Using Comics as Queer Theory," *SANE journal: Sequential Art Narrative in Education*: Vol. 2 : Iss. 2 , Article 2.
Available at: http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/sane/vol2/iss2/2

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in SANE journal: Sequential Art Narrative in Education by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Introduction

Teaching either queer theory or comics studies at the college level inevitably raises a number of pedagogical questions: how does one teach a student to queer a text if that student is not already attuned to queer politics? What are the best practices to teach a student to critically *look* while critically thinking? What are the most effective ways to engage students in the historical and current activist endeavors of both queerness and comics? Finally, what is an effective mode for conveying the importance of visuality and visibility? With these questions in mind, I propose that teaching the politics of queer studies, theory, and history through the visual medium of comics, can help open up conversations with undergraduate students about the political history of graphic literature, the application of queer theoretical concepts, and the ways in which comics have been used for social activism. Because queer theory can be incredibly complex, abstract, and activist in nature, using comics as a way of demonstrating queer theory in the classroom can teach students how to enact and *do* queer theory; by reading and making comics, students can learn both concrete and theoretical tools for combatting oppressive discourses, modes of meaning making, and institutions.

Because the definitions of terms like "queer" and "comics" have been thoroughly disputed, coupling these concepts in the classroom can be a fruitful way of encouraging students to think about the politics of defining and labeling. Charles Hatfield (2009) has claimed that he uses the varying definitions of comics as a teaching tool by "putting competing definitions of comics on the table, discussing the tactical nature of definitions in general, and helping students see why the question of comics' definitions has been so aggravated" (22). Hatfield uses comics' "impossible definition" [1] as a way of inviting dialogue about mobilization and marketing strategies within a marginalized industry. Similarly, comics can be useful for specifically queer theoretical pedagogy, as this contested definition encourages students to think about what it means to label or define identity, what the political implications are of doing so, and how identity categories can be politically advantageous and/or detrimental in terms of social and activist mobilization. Indeed, the elusive definitions of comics and queerness are important starting points for analyzing what it means to enact or embody

[1] The term "impossible definition," when referring to comics, is taken from Thierry Groensteen's foundational text *The System of Comics* (2007). In his follow up text, *Comics and Narration* (2011), Groensteen updates this notion of the impossible definition of comics by citing Ann Miller's working definition: "'As a visual and narrative art, [comics] produce meaning out of images which are in a sequential relationship, and which co-exist with each other spatially, with or without text'" (Miller quoted in Groensteen 9). While Groensteen accepts this definition as "balanced and sensible," he nonetheless admits that it does not apply to all comics and thus cannot be an overarching definition of the medium (9).

queerness within and live on the periphery of a straight-dominated society. If one of the central projects of queer theory is to visualize and make visible queer existence and history, then teaching comics can encourage students to examine the meanings of marginalization and analyze how language and images can be and have been used for queering endeavors of challenging oppression.

Like the definition of comics, queer theoretical concepts are hotly debated, from the theories of negativity of academics such as Lee Edelman (2004) and Leo Bersani (1987) to the queer potentiality theories of scholars like José Esteban Muñoz (2009).[2] At its foundation, though, queer theory seeks to examine and deconstruct what Gayle Rubin (1975) calls the "sex/gender system," or "the set of arrangements by which society transforms biological sexuality into products of human activity, and in which these transformed sexual needs are satisfied" (159). Writing in the 1970s, Rubin points to the social constructs of sex, gender, and sexuality as separate, yet intertwining categories of identity and embodiment. These categories have been problematically designated as co-constitutive, with one seen as *determining* another, and the oppression of nonnormative sexualities and "the subordination of women can be seen as a product of the relationships by which sex and gender are organized and produced" (177). Queer theory, then, seeks to expose the system for its hierarchical tendencies that link sex to gender to sexuality as "natural" processes that position women and LGBTQ+ individuals as inferior to the supposed normative standard. In this way, gender and sexuality are often seen as entwined with one another, as performing one's gender "properly" means partnering "properly" with a member of the opposite gender.[3] Despite some disagreement around the best way to mobilize against such an oppressive system, studying queer theory involves a degree of activism that interrogates how

---

[2] Edelman, in his book *No Future* (2004) outlines a theory of negativity in which he argues that instead of vying for legitimization, queer individuals (especially gay men) should embrace the death drive and reject futurity altogether. Bersani claims a similar rejection in his essay "Is the Rectum a Grave?" (1987), arguing that everyone should recognize the revulsion and powerlessness involved in *all* sex. On the opposite end of the spectrum, Muñoz (2009) directly contests Edelman and Bersani, claiming that queerness *always* involves a potentiality, a quest for legitimate futurity.

[3] Gender scholar Judith Butler (1993) is often credited with having elaborated on the concept of gender performativity, arguing that we all perform our genders through our bodies, discourses, and actions, always under constraint and always through a repetition of acts. Butler claims that gender and sexuality, while separate concepts, nonetheless inform one another through performativity: "without this heterosexual *matrix*, as it were, it appears that the stability of these gendered positions would be called into question" (23). Performativity, then, involves the socially constraining process through which gender performance is enacted through heterosexual pairing and practice.

these seemingly "natural" processes of establishing gender and sexuality form dangerous and damaging hierarchies.

Importantly, though, the sex/gender/sexuality system is intimately wrapped up with issues of visuality and visibility. Systems like compulsory heterosexuality perpetuate through their visibility, rendering non-normative genders or sexualities virtually unimaginable and restricted from view. Paradoxically, normative sexuality continues to be constructed as naturalized, making it insidiously invisible in the social world while queer sexualities become hyper-visible as "deviant." These seemingly contradictory ways of being in the world are intertwined with the politics of visuality, and teaching comics in the undergraduate college English classroom as a queer process can allow students the ability to *actively* and *visually* challenge the socio-cultural codes embedded into comics and other visual systems. Helping students become active and participatory agents in learning about and challenging homophobia and heteronormativity in (and out of) the classroom is not only a important pedagogical approach that may help broaden students' literary interests, but also one with larger social and ethical implications. As Mollie V. Blackburn and Jill M. Smith (2010) argue, utilizing queer literature and engaging students through the process of identifying and challenging gender and sexuality norms through literature is particularly important for queer students who might not feel as if they belong. The authors note that "from the time they enter school, students are systematically calibrated with 'normal' characterizations of one of the two gender assignments, male or female, and these manipulations, in turn, are used to inform and enforce heteronormative school cultures, curricula, and policies" (627). Using literature that challenges heteronormativity as an institution, Blackburn and Smith argue, is essential to helping queer students, especially, find their way within the often hostile environment of school.

While Blackburn and Smith largely focus on secondary education, this article applies their main claims to the college English classroom. Using my experience teaching an undergraduate literature course called Queer Graphic Narrative as reference, I argue that comics provide an especially useful opportunity to do the important work Blackburn and Smith lay out for educators: namely, helping students recognize the oppressive conditions of heteronormativity and homophobia and aiding queer students particularly with the tools to challenge these systems. I cite three main areas where comics and queer theory can be combined pedagogically: in engaging with the politics of representation, examining the form and function of comics structures, and envisioning queer time and space through comics architecture. To sustain this claim, I analyze the potentiality of the following texts: Michael Doig and India Swift's *Frostblight Saga* (2013), Ted Naifeh and Tristan Crane's *How Loathsome* (2004), Shaun Tan's *The Arrival* (2006), Julie Maroh's *Blue is the Warmest Color*

(2013), and Alison Bechdel's *Dykes to Watch Out For* (2008). Ranging widely in style, form, intended audience, and subject matter, these texts offer an array of opportunities for understanding queer theory and politics through comics. Prioritizing comics with explicitly queer characters, like *How Loathsome*, pushes students to engage with the politics of visibility in various media. Teaching texts that engage with layers of social conflict, like *Dykes to Watch Out For*, for instance, can help students recognize the intersectionality of identity and how racial, sexual, or gendered histories cannot be separated from one another. Using texts that do not explicitly foreground queer identities, like Shaun Tan's *The Arrival*, fosters a method of critical looking that assists students to see how the systems of gender and sexuality pervade all areas of aesthetic and social organization. By teaching these and other texts alongside queer theoretical concepts, I have found that students are able to better combine theory and practice, and are generally more motivated to engage with the social world, when they are able to visualize queer bodies, experiences, and struggles through comics.

Overlapping Theories of Comics and Queerness

Comics are productive pedagogical tools for teaching various forms of critical engagement with texts, as their formal dimensions allow for layers of meaning making to occur. By working through textual, visual, spatial, temporal, and sensory modes of making meaning, students are able to note the complex interactions of these codes that are at the foundation of comics, and educators can use such texts as a means of developing critical thought around what constitutes a text, how texts circulate, and how texts operate within the social world. Indeed, Rocco Versaci (2001) notes that "comic books make an ideal subject and source for [examining literature] because they give us the opportunity to raise larger questions of literary merit and canon formation and in the process allow students to understand that all voices—including their own—need to be heard in matters of judging literary quality" (65). Through his experience teaching comics in a first year college composition class, Versaci found that "by using comic books in the classroom, we open up a vital avenue of questions concerning what 'literature' is, and in so doing we begin to 'organize-and-effect' important changes in several ways" (65). These ways of effecting change, according to Versaci, include diversifying voices in the classroom, encouraging students to participate in classroom discussion, and warning students about presuming the quality of a text before they engage with it (66).

To Versaci's list, I would add that teaching comics in the classroom helps students dissect what comprises a "text" and how different modalities overlap in various media. No doubt, the very structure of comics makes obvious a central premise of *all* forms of media: that the various codes that constitute a text (visual,

textual, narrative, sensory, etc.) are enveloped in a meshwork[4] of information that is central to the text's meaning making capabilities. As Barbara Postema notes in *Narrative Structure in Comics* (2013), "comics signify their own reading processes, creating and instructing new ways of signification as necessary…time and again changing the rules of how they are to be read, but simultaneously offering a manual for how to approach them" (116, 120). Because of this self-reflexive, built-in pedagogy, the immense variation within comics production works in its favor by presenting a new meshwork of codes to be deciphered per strip, comic book, or graphic novel, with each text setting up "structures to teach readers their own conventions" (120). Therefore, the very form of comics is pedagogical – comics invite readers to dissect and learn as they read, becoming active participants in the narrative, visual, textual, and sensory construction of the story.

Indeed, comics encourage active participation through their multimodal nature. In his book, *Graphic Encounters: Comics and the Sponsorship of Multimodal Literacy* (2013), Dale Jacobs argues that "reading and writing multimodal texts, then, is an active process for creators, but also for readers who by necessity engage in the active production of meaning and who use all resources available to them based on their own familiarity with the comics medium and its inherent grammars, their histories, life experiences, and interests" (17). That comics draw on auditory, visual, and (sometimes) linguistic codes, Jacobs argues, is essential to the participatory nature of comics reading. While Jacobs highlights the multimodal nature of comics, James Bucky Carter, in his essay "Transforming English with Graphic Novels: Moving Toward Our 'Optimus Prime'" (2007) highlights comics' ability to encourage students to actively engage not only in the narrative and structure at hand, but also in the social justice concerns of particular comics like Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (2003), Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2007), and Robert Morales' *Truth: Red, White, and Black* (2004). Carter suggests three main ways comics can be used in the classroom to "transform" students and help them engage with the social world. First, Carter argues, comics should be used in cross-curricular fields to "exploit the potential of titles that make clear political statements or get at issues of national and international import" (51). Second, comics should compliment traditional texts and, finally, comics should employ the use of contact zone theory. Contact zone theory, Carter explains, "asks students and teachers to critically examine important issues from multiple social and personal points of

[4] Tim Ingold, in his innovative book, *Lines: A Brief History* (2007), notes that the meshwork differs from the network in that it places its emphasis less on the nodes that connect a network and more on the lines that connect those nodes. In this way, the meshwork is a muddier, more complex image of connectivity that centralizes the *process* of connecting related concepts, rather than the result of concepts being related.

view and to post those views in a dialogic conversation with others who do the same" (51). Coupling comics with contact zone theory pushes students to consider how the narrative material pertains to and interacts with the social world. Further, this method helps students see how social justice issues are visualized via visual literature, and supports students in their active engagement with such social concerns.

Helping students recognize social justice issues in comics, and teaching them to connect visual and social codes, can encourage them to envision new systems that constitute a more equitable world. Since systems of gender and sexuality are so immensely pervasive, they inevitably influence the many codes of meaning in various media. In *Technologies of Gender* (1987), Teresa De Lauretis argues that "most available theories of reading, writing, sexuality, ideology, or any other cultural production are built on male narratives of gender...bound by the heterosexual contract" (25). While major literary and comics canons have typically been established through heteropatriarchal traditions, countless comics artists and authors have used the medium as a means of directly challenging that tradition, exploiting the malleability of the form as counter politics and social activism. Artists such as Trina Robbins, Alison Bechdel, Steve MacIsaac, Howard Cruse, and many others have utilized comics to visualize queer worlds and draw themselves and their lives, traumas, and victories into reality. De Lauretis claims that "to envision gender (men and women) otherwise, and to (re)construct it in terms other than those dictated by the patriarchal contract, we must walk out of the male-centered frame of reference in which gender and sexuality are (re)produced by the discourse of male sexuality" (17). Teaching queer theory through comics accomplishes this task laid out by De Lauretis; (queer) comics allow educators space to instruct their students to challenge the heteropatriarchal canon of literature and media and teach critical engagements with form and content that have influenced activism against such systems. Keeping De Lauretis' task in mind, I contend that comics can be effective tools for teaching students to engage the politics of representation, examine the form and function of comics structures, and envision queer time and space. Through these methods, educators can encourage their undergraduate students to grapple with both the academic and activist potentiality of queer theory and find ways to "walk out" of the dominant frames of reference so commonly taught in and out of the classroom.

Engaging the Politics of Representation

In her essay "Teaching Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*: The Construction of a Modernist Lesbian Graphic Novel" (2015), Julia Klimek explains how she utilizes queer characters and artists as a way of teaching her students about the complexities of gender and sexuality representation in media. Her lessons

included looking at specific aesthetics in *Fun Home* as they relate to social issues: "to bring the class on board with the somewhat abstract idea of the gaze and its inclusion or exclusion of particular elements on which the construction of the family identity depends (heterosexuality as privileged, homosexuality as excluded), we look closely at several pages of *Fun Home* that show the taking of a specific photograph" (138). Bechdel's coupling of photographs and illustrations allow Klimek to open up discussion about whether an "authentic" self exists and how various visual representations can speak to any kind of supposed authenticity, ultimately questioning the category of authenticity altogether. In this way, Klimek uses an explicitly queer text to get her students to consider the implications of visualizing the queer body, eventually leading her students to the conclusion that "a sexual identity, then, is constructed not independently by a character or person, but always within a socio-historical context" (140). Klimek's useful teaching strategy is important for a number of reasons, including helping students engage critically with social concerns about visibility and encouraging students to pursue further queer comics, thereby highlighting the contributions of marginalized authors and artists to the field of comics. Exposing students to visual depictions of queer lives, kinship structures, and bodies helps them bridge the gaps between aesthetic representations and the social world. Like Klimek suggests, highlighting the relationship between queer history and comics foregrounds LGBTQ+ people as worthy of existing and queer texts as worthy of critical engagement.

Since, as W.J.T. Mitchell (2005) claims, "vision has a history," educators like Klimek can utilize queer comics to their fullest potential by delving into the politics of queer visual representation (119). Mitchell argues that "eye and ear, and their associated structures of sensibility, are in this respect no different from the other figures of difference between words and images: they are categories of power and value, ways of enlisting nature in our causes and crusades" (119). Looking, then, is a *learned* process, a culturally constructed way of understanding the world.

Drawing on this assertion, Dale Jacobs (2013) argues that comics sponsor visual literacy through layers of multimodality. Linking visual literacy to critical engagement, Jacobs claims, "comics can be used to greater effectiveness in teaching at all levels as a way to arm students with the critical literacy skills they need to negotiate diverse systems of meaning making" (7). Because of its cultural and temporal constructs, looking is highly motivated by social interactions and institutional concerns and the multimodal literacy comics offer helps students, teachers, and readers better identify how visual codes enmesh with social codes. Seeing itself is a value entwined with political and social agendas and the history of visualization, like visualization itself, is interpretive and socially mediated. While teaching critical thinking through narrative constructions, then, educators

can use comics as a way of teaching critical *looking*. As a particularly queer theoretical approach to pedagogy, comics can be a vessel through which students learn to deconstruct, through a process of critical looking, the social assumptions about gender, sexuality, race, and identity that they bring to visual works.

Using comics to teach critical looking is an especially useful tool when examining wordless graphic texts with a class. Due to the "silence" of these texts, wordless comics inherently become contested ground for cultural codes, where artist/author and reader vie for meaning via visual signifiers. Indeed, comics do not necessarily have to foreground queer characters or themes to be effectively utilized as pedagogical instruments for queer critical looking. Michael Doig and India Swift's *Frostblight Saga*, for example, is a vibrant wordless webcomic that was published in two parts in December of 2013. This Advent story, told in two segments called "Fox" and "Bear," focuses on the relationship between human civilization and animal encounters, set amongst a snowy backdrop of abstract watercolors. The bleeding panels take full advantage of the web's scrolling feature, presenting an ever-evolving painted narrative that centralizes the tense relationship between colonizing humans and powerful animals. While the text does not necessarily centralize issues of queerness, it does focus on kinship and power in various ways and, importantly, the wordlessness of the narrative makes it a compelling case for teaching queer critical looking. Because of the comics' lack of words, Doig and Swift depict characters like the protagonist of "Bear" using only visual codes represented through cultural cues. These cultural cues involve illustrating signifiers of identity such as body position, shape and size, general appearance, clothing, adornment, hairstyle, and/or behavior – all constructed elements that are part of the performativity of gender and sexuality that rely on visuality and perception for meaning. For example, the seemingly young protagonist in "Bear" is depicted as having a petite stature and short blonde hair, and wearing goggles, a long scarf and warm, baggy neutral-toned clothing, effective for combat and hunting. The protagonist's gender or sexual identities, however, are never explicitly offered to the reader, leaving the reader to assume a gender or sexuality based on these visual signifiers alone.

As a critical looking exercise, I first ask students what gender and/or sexuality they think the protagonist identifies as, inviting students to think more deeply about the *visuality* of identity performance in general. I invite students to identify or even list any gendered and sexual codes embedded by Doig and Swift that led them to their assumptions, encouraging students to become cognizant about elements of performativity that often go ignored as "natural" or "innate." Finally, I use this list-making activity to open up a discussion about how elements like hairstyle or clothing become circulated as essential to and determining of one's sex, gender, or sexuality much to the detriment of individuals who fail to be seen as "properly" performing their identities. Can we say that we *know* the

protagonist's gender or sexual identity? In fact, can we say anything definitive about the protagonist's identity at all? What might be the consequences of assuming the protagonist's gender based solely off of these visual cues? What cultural codes are Doig and Swift circulating in their depictions of the protagonist? These questions, derived from this exercise in critical looking, then, can be extremely fruitful in helping students interrogate the assumptions they bring to visual works, and the social world, about what it means to embody and *do* gender and sexuality. Moreover, with no words to explicitly identify characters like this protagonist, *Frostblight Saga* and other wordless graphic texts lend themselves to discussions of "what if" narratives. In other words, educators can open up critical dialogue about narrative representation through visually ambiguous characters like that of *Frostblight Saga*, such as: what if the protagonist explicitly identified as a boy or a man? How might we read this comic differently if the protagonist explicitly identified as a girl or woman? What would it mean for the narrative if the protagonist explicitly identified as transgender or genderqueer? How do various genders or sexualities interact with the main themes of the text, namely humanity's contentious interaction with nature? Why do we feel such a compulsive need to assign gender and sexuality to others? How might our language help or hinder us from a more expansive view of gender and sexuality? I have found that through these activities and discussions students tend to examine both their own cultural assumptions about what gender and sexuality look like *and* how artists and authors visualize such cultural understandings, opening up space for a larger dialogue about how these assumptions come to be and what the implications of such understandings might be.

Additionally, through activities such as the one detailed above, students can become more aware of the interactive authorial process of reading comics that often goes overlooked. In a study that drew on a group of six high school students' multimodal literacies, Sean P. Connors (2012) found that in the end, "the participants drew on a range of semiotic resources" that were already available to them to make meaning from the graphic texts they read (48). In this study, students were able to process the codes given to them and couple them with their own meaning-making capabilities to create an understanding of the text. Connors and other comics literacy scholars acknowledge that this author/reader interaction is one of the medium's pedagogical virtues. In other words, when students recognize that the visual codes of comics are developed through what Pascal Lefevre (2011) calls the author's "visual ontology," they can learn to challenge the cultural assumptions that form that ontology while recognizing their own assumptions in the process (16). Since authorial visual ontologies are always already enmeshed in social understandings of gender and sexuality, helping students confront the cultural codes embedded in the text is one way of deconstructing the relationship between the author and the reader. Activities such

as the *Frostblight Saga* critical looking exercise demonstrate how comics, and especially wordless comics, are valuable queer theory tools in that they expose seemingly natural processes of identification as constructed and culturally specific.

Analyzing Representation

The goal of fostering critical looking and thinking skills through identifying social norms and cultural codes in literature is one shared by literacy scholars Mollie V. Blackburn et al. In their article "Examining Queer Elements and Ideologies in LGBT-Themed Literature: What Queer Literature can Offer Young Adult Readers" (2015), Blackburn et al. describe a three-year study they conducted through a book discussion group comprising LGBTQ+ teachers and students. The scholars analyzed the content of LGBTQ+-themed books discussed in the group and determined that the books could be split into two main camps: LGBT-inclusive and queer. While LGBT-inclusive texts "reinforce[d] heteronormativity and binary constructions of sex and gender," queer literature "strives to suspend sexual and gender identities rather than underscore them," disrupting norms and challenging social constructions of sexuality and gender (12). Importantly, Blackburn et al. found that teaching students to understand that "queer" is more than the sum of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people, and that "studying texts for disruptions of sexuality and gender norms provides students with a wider array of ways of being in the world" (44). The implications of these findings cannot be overstated: "examining texts for different conceptualizations of sexual and gender identities might invite students and teachers to interrogate assumed notions of identities as essential or even developmental. This might free a student who has been tagged as a fag or a dyke, even for years, of the burden of homophobia, even if only in his or her English language arts class" (44). Texts like *Frostblight Saga*, which offer a canvas for identifying and challenging the visuality of gender and sexuality norms, can provide the occasion for, as Blackburn et al. claim, "rendering the text more open and less settled" (45). This process of "unsettling" the text encourages all students to be more aware of how sexuality functions in the social world and might even provide queer-identified students "opportunities to exist and thrive in the realm of the queer, a space where multiple ideologies and conflicting ideologies around sexuality and gender can circulate and be considered, examined, embraced, or rejected by the reader" (45).

The main project of "unsettling," or identifying gendered and sexual hierarchies as culturally constructed and tied to political and social agendas of power, is one of queer theory's central projects. Adrienne Rich (1986) notes that compulsory heterosexuality, or the fact that society "*demands* heterosexuality" is based on the idea that women especially are innately or naturally compelled

towards men (25, emphasis in original). Rich is primarily concerned with "how and why women's choice of women as passionate comrades, life partners, co-workers, lovers, community has been crushed, invalidated, forced into hiding and disguise" (27). Part of the institution of heterosexuality, Rich points out, is the hyper-visibility of normative sexualities that leads to the assumptions of straightness as normal, natural, and superior to other forms of sexual practice and partnership. The hyper-visibility of compulsory heterosexuality consequently relies on labeling other sexualities as "deviant" and rendering them invisible in terms of society and social/civil rights. In this way, sexual identity is intimately intertwined with issues of representation and being seen. Despite being virtually written out of dominant historical narratives and being made visible only as deviant, queerness persists: "the fact is that women in every culture throughout history *have* undertaken the task of independent, nonheterosexual, women-connected existence, to the extent made possible by their context, often in the belief that they were the 'only one' ever to have done so" (32). Some of the tasks of queer theory and queer studies involve analyzing how institutions like that of compulsory heterosexuality operate, exposing them for their potential homophobia, and finding ways to mobilize against or through them.

Indeed, critical looking means examining the politics of visual representation in terms of not only personal identity, but also kinship and relationships. Gayle Rubin (1975) notes that "kinship systems do not merely encourage heterosexuality to the detriment of homosexuality. In the first place, specific forms of heterosexuality may be required" (180-181). This requirement takes on a purely performative function, where individuals prove their gender "normalcy" by proving their sexual "normalcy"; while gender and sexuality are *not* interchangeable concepts, failure to perform one is seen as a failure to perform the other. Queer comics that highlight kinship can be powerful in the classroom for challenging the mandate of compulsory heterosexuality. For example, Ted Naifeh and Tristan Crane's *How Loathsome* (2004) is an especially valuable text to use in the classroom. *How Loathsome* tells the story of a group of queer, gender queer, and transgender individuals forming alternative kinships amidst a homophobic city landscape, utilizing fantasy as a means of escaping and making sense of the oppressive world in which they live. The final page of the graphic novel illustrates the significance of queer representation, as the queer characters, after struggling with building and trusting their queer community, find their "way through the endless lonely night" together (109). Despite struggling with each other and the normative society around then, these characters find belonging and kinship amongst one another. They are visually androgynous and the black and white color palette used by Naifeh and Crane contributes to the somber, yet hopeful tone resonating at the end of the text, implying that queer existence is rife with turmoil but tempered by alternative kinship and bonding. Utilizing a comics

text like this one in the classroom helps students develop an understanding of political and social visibility as intertwined with issues of visuality. Given the push for queerness to remain hidden or invisible, texts like *How Loathsome* teach students to critically engage with ideas like the one central to this text: that "we're all the same brilliantly flawed creatures at times stumbling" (109). Seeing queer characters with various bodily and sexual configurations, like Catherine and Chloe of *How Loathsome*, embrace alternative ways of being and cope with an oppressive world exposes students to bodies and lives they might not otherwise encounter.

My students have expressed slight discomfort with this text, as they claim it presented a dark depiction of queer struggles with homophobic violence and drug use that they were not used to seeing in media. However, many students have noted that the exposure to genderqueer individuals facing immense hardships has helped them become better attuned to both homophobia in the "real" world and the immense variation in bodies, sexual behavior, and ways of existing. Through my experience teaching texts like *How Loathsome*, I have seen that prioritizing queer comics in the classroom exposes students to potentially new ways of being in the world, and it is the visuality of these narratives that encourages students to examine the politics of queer representation in the media at large. Further, comics like this one help students engage in the process of queer world-making through recognizing and envisioning the construction of images. Mitchell (2005) highlights the constructed nature of images by stating, "there have been different kinds of world pictures in different places and eras, and that is why history and comparative anthropology are not just descriptions of events and practices but of *representations* of events and practices. Pictures are our way of gaining access to whatever these things are. Even more emphatically, they are (as philosopher Nelson Goodman puts it) 'ways of world*making*,' not just world mirroring" (xv, emphasis in original). Here, Mitchell asserts that images not only reflect culture, but help shape it. As instruments of world-making, images construct the world around them, influencing and being influenced by the culture in which they are produced. For this reason, comics become invaluable teaching resources for both examining the world and imagining what it could be. *How Loathsome* accomplishes this "worldmaking" project by depicting its characters fantasizing through folklore about how to manage the oppression they face in the "real" world and what restructuring the gender and sexual binaries would mean. Teaching *How Loathsome* invites students to examine the relationship between fantasy and reality, noting how fantasy can be a tool used to understand and cope with reality.

Like *How Loathsome*, Shaun Tan's *The Arrival* (2006) similarly uses fantastical elements as a means of worldmaking. A wordless graphic narrative, *The Arrival* tells the story of a man who flees national persecution (in the form of

a dragon-like creature), leaving his wife and daughter behind to set up a new life in a new nation. Eventually, the man builds a home and sends for his family, and, in the end, the family live happily together. This immigration story centralizes constructed gendered protocols of family duty and migration, making the seemingly nuclear family unit the focus of nation-building and assimilation. I have used this text to encourage students to interrogate what signifiers of gender and sexuality are present in *The Arrival*, helping students begin to see how issues of identity and performance intersect with national concerns about citizenship and immigration. In this way, this text becomes a starting point for dialogue about the historical and cultural meanings of immigration and how nationhood and kinship intersect. Similarly to *Frostblight Saga*, *The Arrival*'s wordlessness opens up meaningful dialogue about performative assumptions the author and the reader both bring to the text. Since the characters could be related to each other in any configuration of kinship, this text provides a fruitful backdrop to analyzing what cultural scripts we have for immigration and nation building: what makes a "proper" citizen? How do we understand masculinity and femininity in terms of kinship roles and nationhood? What kinds of nationalist rhetoric are we regularly exposed to that is or is not depicted in the novel and how does this language employ gendered and sexualized (as well as racialized and classed) notions of citizenship? I found these questions to emerge organically when students examine a text like *The Arrival* with concerns of gender, sexuality, and performativity in mind. My students started the visual analysis by thinking through the visual codes that signaled the gendered and sexual performance involved in concepts of national (un)belonging and ultimately ended up identifying the was *The Arrival* might perpetuate some damaging stereotypes about "proper" immigration, as related to nuclear family structures.

Moreover, students challenged themselves by reading the family at the heart of *The Arrival* as a queer configuration of varying ambiguous genders and sexual relations rather than a nuclear family, and found that the immigration story itself becomes queered and challenged through such a thought exercise. Overall, this text helped students examine how "proper" immigration and citizenship are built on ideals of "proper" gender and sexuality. Further, I coupled *The Arrival* with Erica Rand's important book, *The Ellis Island Snow Globe* (2005), to help students build a critical foundation upon which they could interpret visual codes of meaning in relation to queer kinship and national affiliation. Students became more attuned to the narrative tropes they saw and read in other media and were better able to apply this knowledge to comics by identifying recurring plots, rhetoric, and images within the comic. In so doing, they engage in a critical process of queer world-making, but imagining what different configurations of kinship and migration might look like.

I have also encouraged students to participate in queer world-making by constructing comics of their own that encompass what they think queer worlds, images, and structures might look like. Students inevitably create comics with ambiguous gendered characters or alternative family structures at the center, and a variety of critical questions unfold from there: if, as Mitchell (2005) claims, images are "alive," what might be the queer potential of creating a queer visual character with desires and needs of its own? What are the social and political implications of visualizing a character? (How) can you draw a queer character without relying on circulated stereotypes? In what ways can you use the comics form to validate gender or sexual ambiguity? How can comics elements like panel frames and page layout affect the reader's interpretation of the characters? The fact that these questions about representation and identity are, in many ways, unanswerable can help students see the complex political implications of visibility and visuality, encouraging them to foster their own opinions on and engagements with activism of varying kinds.

Examining Form and Function

In addition to teaching students to identify and deconstruct their own operating assumptions about gender and sexuality through comics, educators can use the form to help students recognize how comics contribute to larger circulating ideas about gender and sexuality. In *Iconology* (1986), Mitchell is wholly invested in the cultural construction of visual and semiotic signs, using the analogy of density versus differentiation as a way of explaining a suitable approach to looking at images. He states: "a picture is normally 'read' in something like the way we read an ungraduated thermometer. Every mark, every modification, every curve or swelling of a line, every modification of texture or color is loaded with semantic potential…Its [an image's] meaning depends rather on its relations with all other marks in a dense, continuous field" (67). Here, Mitchell is pointing to a crux of pictorial theory, namely, that every single part that makes up the whole image is significant to its meaning(s). Additionally, Mitchell points out that the *function* of the image, or the way it operates within culture, should trump fickle attempts to define an image as something distinct from, say, words. In arguing this, Mitchell claims that "we need to ask of a medium, not what 'message' it dictates by virtue of its essential character, but what sort of functional features it employs in a particular context" (69). Comics exemplify this understanding, in that their system is one grounded in gaps and fragments, but their function is coherence and continuity. In other words, comics are necessarily made up of parts that work toward a whole. Therefore, teaching queer comics in the classroom can be a productive way of helping students critically analyze both parts and wholes, individual images and entire narratives, single arguments and their place within

larger discourses. For texts centralizing queerness, this pedagogical practice develops students' abilities to deconstruct discourse and images about sexuality and gender as related to their functions within the larger cultural and political landscape. Given the legal and social changes around issues like marriage equality, adoption rights, medical rights, and transgender rights occurring within recent years, teaching comics *as cultural objects* with a long and complicated history of their own[5] helps students see their function within these larger political issues.

Part of this teaching process is highlighting the function of what Barbara Postema (2013) calls the "gap" in comics. Postema claims that the gap is the central feature of comics, the place where narrative production takes place between the reader and the author. Expanding the notion of the gap from simply the gutter space between comics panels, Postema argues that "gaps signify in numerous different ways. It can be based on the interplay between words and images, where words take on the expressive qualities of images and images take on some of the rules of words; playing with rigid structure and the limits of that structure by collapsing boundaries such as panel and frame; evoking narrative flow from fragments; creating characters in tiny figures that crawl on the pages and take on lives of their own" (121). Put another way, the gap is how "comics create wholes from holes" (xx). If the gap is the place of both imaginative and narrative construction, it becomes a crucial site for exploring and teaching the queer potential of comics.

Foundation literary theorist, Wolfgang Iser (2000), considers the concept of the gap as one between text and understanding, ultimately citing Friedrich Schleiermacher's notion of the "hermeneutic circle" as that which brings the parts of texts in relation to the whole. He notes, "the notion of the whole is always relative and is expanded by the circle through multiple interconnections with ever-new features of the parts, and this expansion in turn throws new light on the understanding of the parts involved. It is this broadening out of the circular movement that permits a controlled approximation to understanding" (54). The hermeneutic circle, then, is the process through which readers bridge the gap between parts and wholes. Iser challenges Shleiermacher's concept by arguing that different readerly approaches to texts might complicate the singular circularity of the hermeneutic circle. This expansion of the hermeneutic circle is especially suitable for comics readership, as it accounts for a multiplicity of artistic and literary styles: "the wider the gap [between parts and wholes], the more complicated the circle tends to become" (xi). In this way, analyzing gaps in

[5] In *Comics Versus Art* (2013), Bart Beaty effectively "interrogates specific historical and social processes that have led to the devaluation of comics as a cultural form and takes note of the recent rise to art world prominence of (certain kinds of) comics" (7). Beaty's text is especially useful in its examination of comics as cultural artifacts.

any literature, but especially in comics, involves circularity that allows for multiple understandings to emerge.

In Postema's and Iser's estimations, the gap (in its multiple forms) is essential to constructing meaning with texts. Teaching the gap in a text like Julie Maroh's *Blue is the Warmest Color* (2013) can be an effective way to encourage students to engage in queer visual world-making through formal analysis. Figure One shows a page from Maroh's graphic text in which Clementine envisions her love, Emma. This page demonstrates the many layers of the gap at work in this text: the distinction between the bright blue coloring and the greyscale color palette; the relationship between the imagined and the real as shown through Clementine's vision; the use of small panels to visualize far perspective and long, rectangular panels to show up-close perspective; the use of asymmetrical gutters to relay chronology and imagination; the "hanging" text box in the middle of the page as interacting with Clementine's inner monologue; the standard gutter size and its relation to the larger hyper-frame of the page; and, finally, the interaction between seeing this imagined moment as the reader and Clementine's inability to literally see as her eyes are shut. Within all of these layers of the gap, the reader is left with enduring resonances of the love and loss at the heart of this text. Clementine, in this moment, exists in a perpetual state of the gap, as she is trapped between the envisioned ghost of her imagination and the tangible interaction with a reality void of Emma.

To invite students to participate in a process of queer world-making, where they *imagine* the parts of this queer sexual and imagined encounter while analyzing the visual codes on the page, I instruct students to "fill in" the many instances of the gap in this page by drawing, writing, or verbalizing Clementine's invented narrative. Through this activity, I found that students are able to work constructively in the gap space of the page, imagining Clementine and Emma's interaction and relationship through fragments, utilizing this element of comics to its fullest and queerest potential. Students are able to analyze and interrogate what Iser (1978) calls their "aesthetic response" to the text, or the "dialectic relationship between text, reader, and their interaction" (x). The aesthetic response "brings into play the imaginative and perceptive faculties of the reader" (x). Filling in the gaps of Clementine and Emma's interactions, then, involves the students acknowledging their initial aesthetic responses of the visual codes provided and imagining what is only implied. This process of queer world-making, students come to realize, is influenced by a combination of author, text, reader, and, in this case, translator. Indeed, because *Blue is the Warmest Color* was originally published in French in 2010, this text also lends itself to analyzing another layer of the gap: that of language, image, and media translation. The various iterations of the text (the French version, the English edition, and the 2013 French-language film adaptation) beg certain critical questions about the changes

texts undergo when mediated in different ways. Having students interact with various versions of the same queer-centered text, like Maroh's, helps them see the

Figure One: Clementine imagines Emma in *Blue is the Warmest Color* (32). Reprinted with permission from Arsenal Pulp Press.

cultural differences around sex, gender, and sexuality, engage with the politics of translation, and critically analyze these texts' functions within particular cultures. In other words, this engagement can teach students to see how their aesthetic responses to texts are also mediated by their socio-cultural situation. In this way, a text like *Blue is the Warmest Color* opens students up to queer world-making, while encouraging them to see how comics images are also world-mirroring.

Envisioning Queer Time and Space

As a medium with world-making potential, comics can also be useful pedagogical tools in relaying theories of queer time and space as counter to what Halberstam (2005) and other queer theorists call "repro-time." Repro-time is the construction of time and space that relies on normative gender and sexual interaction and behavior: "the time of reproduction is ruled by a biological clock for women and by strict bourgeois rules of respectability and scheduling for married couples…many and possibly most people believe that the scheduling of repro-time is natural and desirable…It also connects the family to the historical past of the nation, and glances ahead to connect the family to the future of both familial and national stability" (5). Repro-time, then, is the understanding that linear teleologies that foreground the genealogical line are necessitated by both literal heterosexual pairing and symbolic ways of perpetuating gendered and sexual hierarchies. This construction of time, Halberstam notes, pervades all institutions and interactions of United States culture and links to spatial arrangements within society.

Mitchell (1986), too, outlines the construction of space and time as distinct social categorizations that produce and reproduce ideologies of gender and sexuality. In deconstructing various arguments about the misunderstood distinctions between words and images, Mitchell demonstrates that images and words have been situated as cultural entities that engage in gendered discourse within culture: "paintings, like women, are ideally silent, beautiful creatures designed for the gratification of the eye, in contrast to the sublime eloquence proper for the manly art of poetry" (110). The seeming dichotomy between words and images that operates especially within Western culture, Mitchell claims, connects with notions of time and space, with images occupying space and words figuring time. In this way, the seeming "feminization" of images has led to their cultural position as inferior to words, and, simultaneously, words and images' connections with time and space mean these categories also become a part of gendered discourse.

As a complex medium with immense variety in form, comics overtly muddy, disrupt, or challenge the distinctions between words and images, and time and space. Comics challenge repro-time by encouraging a more complicated,

meshworked construction of time and space that force readers outside of the linear chronological model of narrative meaning making. In fact, in comics, time *is* space and space *is* time: the spatialized fragments of panels and images on any given comics page signal the movement of time, uniting the split between time and space and queering the established divide by encouraging a more muddied, less linear vision of both. A queer theoretical approach to teaching comics would involve foregrounding the potentiality of this meshworked, circular reading process, where "there is a certain amount of anticipation involved in reading comics, but foremost, it is a continual weaving back and forth, as the reader first 'skips over' the gutter to look at the next panel, and then mentally goes into the gutter to fill in the actions, events, or transitions that took place in the gap between the panels" (Postema, 2013, 66). This "back and forth" movement in comics is not only significant to the narrative structure of each text, but is also a way of challenging linear models of narrative that rely on iterations of repro-time. As Postema (2013) argues, "the creation of action in a comic is an intricate and continuous negotiation and (re)consideration of various panels at the same time, based on visual information that panels, as signifying syntagms, provide" (66). Reading comics, then, becomes a complex interaction, in which spatialized time is read as interweaving, circular, and distinctly non-linear. By teaching the complexities of time and space in comics, educators can teach their students how to deconstruct normative notions of time and space in narrative, while also encouraging them to highlight the potential of queer time and space.

One example of such a teaching lesson involves mapping a page like the 2008 page, "From the Subprime to the Ridiculous," from Alison Bechdel's long-running comic *Dykes to Watch Out For*. This page is composed of four semi-grid-like horizontal strips of 2-3 panels each depicting a cast of characters interacting in various ways as friends, partners, and parents. Their interactions, which involve inviting friends to play a board game, getting ready to go out to dinner, and introducing a package of vibrators to a partner, are coupled with media announcements from the television and newspapers critically commenting on the United States' investment in the Iraq War. Though the panels are displayed in a rather linear fashion, each leading to the next (left to right, top to bottom), the structure of this page challenges this linearity by overlapping queer encounters with personal and political happenings. Bechdel demonstrates that for this group of queer women, the personal *is* political and things like cooking dinner for family are immersed within a larger social landscape of war, corruption, and oppression. This page is one example of comics' ability to create queer time and space, as the reader *has* to continually scan back and forth, up and down, circularly to make sense of the political engagements of the material presented. The reading movement here is anything but linear – it is complex, dense, circular, and entangled and it demonstrates the page's capability of presenting queer time and

space through depictions of queer characters and lives. The queer time and space of this page "develop[s] according to other logics of location, movement, and identification" than heterosexuality and reproduction (Halberstam, 2005, 1).

Teaching this page from a queer theory approach would involve asking students to map out a meshwork of entangled meaning. Sean P. Connors (2015) notes that having students map comics and create their own pages are ways of helping them understand "how multimodal design shapes meaning construction" (7). According to Connors' findings, when students work with the architecture of comics in the classroom, "the graphic novels function as mentor texts, as students draw on them to think more deeply about different facets of multimodal design" (7). In terms of queer comics, the "mentor texts" become associated not just with the mechanics of multimodal design, but also with social mechanisms of sexuality and gender, and mapping exercises can be fruitful for analyzing how comics architecture engages with these social meanings. I begin this particular mapping exercise by inviting students to first map out what they think the family narrative(s) told in the page of this "mentor text" is, using circular nodes to highlight each significant moment (such as Jasmine inviting her family/friends to a dinner of "vegan chitlins"), and connect each node with a line marking the chronology within the page. In this activity, lines do *not* have to be straight; in fact, lines connecting familial narrative events in this page will inevitably be rounded, overlapping, or tangled as the chronology of such a page is non-linear. After mapping the family narrative(s), I ask students to draw a similar map, using a different color, overtop of the familial narrative outlining the political commentary on the Iraq War. Finally, I have students identify with a different color the points of contact between these two narrative preoccupations. The final maps will, of course, look messy and convoluted, but will help students use their own visual creations to see how complex temporal exchanges and meanings are situated through a seemingly standard panel formation. Additionally, the maps serve as visual signifiers of how personal and political happenings occur amidst and within each other for queer (and all) individuals. Exercises like this one allow students to see the full potential of queer time as spatialized through the comics form. Further, they help students explore the possibilities for texts like Bechdel's that concentrate on the interlacing nature of personal, social, and political events in queer lives. Such an exercise is a queer theoretical approach to comics and makes primary the world-making and world-mirroring practices of queerness and comics.

Conclusion: Queer Education Through Comics

Teaching comics as queer theory means not only prioritizing queer texts in the classroom, but also centralizing the queer potentiality of the form itself within

class activities and discussions. It means approaching visual literature with queer ethics and politics in mind and not shying away from conversations about activist engagement or debated political topics. For queer educators, this is an especially powerful tool, and for queer students it can mean providing a space to work out their own engagements with the social and aesthetic world. The incredible diversity of comics texts lends itself to breaking formulaic notions of the world through reading and creating, as well as teaching. Using comics theory as queer theory promotes innovative critical thinking and critical looking skills, showing LGBTQ+ students that their representation matters and contributing to the open-mindedness of students as they engage with discourse surrounding queerness in both the classroom and the social world.

References

Beaty, Bart. *Comics Versus Art*. 2013. University of Toronto Press.

Bechdel, Alison. "From the Subprime to the Ridiculous." *The Essential Dykes to Watch Out For*. 2008. Houghton Mifflin.

Bersani, Leo. "Is the Rectum a Grave?" *AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism.* 1987. 43. 197-222.

Blackburn, Mollie V. et al. "Examining Queer Elements and Ideologies in LGBT-Themed Literature: What Queer Literature can Offer Young Adult Readers." *Journal of Literacy Research*. 2015. 47.1. 11-48.

Blackburn, Mollie V. and Jill M. Smith. "Moving Beyond the Inclusion of LGBT-Themed Literature in English Language Arts Classrooms: Interrogating Heteronormativity and Exploring Intersectionality." *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*. 2010. 53.8. 625-634.

Butler, Judith. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex."* 1993. Routledge.

Carter, James Bucky. "Transforming English with Graphic Novels: Moving Toward Our 'Optimus Prime.'" *The English Journal*. 2007. 97.2. 49-53.

Crane, Tristan and Ted Naifeh. *How Loathsome*. 2004. ComicsLit.

Connors, Sean P. "Expanding Students' Analytical Frameworks Through the Study of Graphic Novels." *Journal of Children's Literature.* 2015. 41.2. 5-15.

---. "Weaving Multimodal Meaning in a Graphic Novel Reading Group." *Visual Communication.* 2012. 12.1. 27-53.

Cruse, Howard. *Stuck Rubber Baby.* 2010. Vertigo.

De Lauretis, Teresa. *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film, and Fiction.* 1987. Indiana University Press.

Doig, Michael and India Swift. *Frostblight Saga.* 2013. Taptastic Comics. Web.

Edelman, Lee. *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive.* 2004. Duke University Press.

Groensteen, Thierry. *Comics and Narration.* Trans. Ann Miller. 2011. University Press of Mississippi.

---. *The System of Comics.* Trans. Bart Beaty and Nick Nguyen. 2007. University Press of Mississippi.

Halberstam, J. *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives.* 2005. New York University Press.

Hatfield, Charles. Ed. Stephen E. Tabachnick. "Defining Comics in the Classroom; or, The Pros and Cons of Unfixability." *Teaching the Graphic Novel.* 2009. Modern Language Association of America. 19-27.

Ingold, Tim. *Lines: A Brief History.* 2007. Routledge.

Iser, Wolfgang. *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response.* 1978. Johns Hopkins Press.

---. *The Range of Interpretation.* 2000. Columbia University Press.

Jacobs, Dale. *Graphic Encounters: Comics and the Sponsorship of Multimodal Literacy.* 2013. Bloomsbury.

Klimek, Julia. Ed. Matthew L. Miller. "Teaching Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*: The Construction of a Modernist Lesbian Graphic Novel." *Class, Please Open Your Comics: Essays on Teaching with Graphic Narratives*. 2015. McFarland. 131-142.

Lefevre, Pascal. "Some Medium-Specific Qualities of Graphic Sequences." *SubStance*. 2011. 40.1. 14-33.

Maroh, Julie. *Blue is the Warmest Color*. 2013. Arsenal Pulp Press.

Mitchell, W.J.T. *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology*. 1986. University of Chicago Press.

---. *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images*. 2005. University of Chicago Press.

Muñoz, José Esteban. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. 2009. New York University Press.

Postema, Barbara. *Narrative Structure in Comics: Making Sense of Fragments*. 2013. RIT Press.

Rand, Erica. *The Ellis Island Snow Globe*. 2005. Duke University Press.

Rich, Adrienne. "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" *Blood, Bread, and Poetry: Selected Prose*. 1986. Norton. 23-75.

Rubin, Gayle. Ed. Rayna R. Reiter. "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex." *Toward an Anthropology of Women*. 1975. Monthly Review Press. 157-210.

Stevenson, Noelle and Grace Ellis. *Lumberjanes: Beware the Kitten Holy* Vol. 1. 2015. BOOM!

Versaci, Rocco. "How Comic Books Can Change the Way Our Students See Literature: One Teacher's Perspective." *English Journal*. 2001. 91.2. 61-67.

SANE journal: Sequential Art Narrative in Education

Volume 2 | Issue 2 Article 3

April 2017

Images, Speech Balloons, and Artful Representation: Comics as Visual Narratives of Early Career Teachers

Julian Lawrence
University of British Columbia, julian@julianlawrence.net

Ching-Chiu Lin
University of British Columbia, ching-chiu.lin@ubc.ca

Rita Irwin
University of British Columbia, rita.irwin@ubc.ca

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/sane

Part of the American Literature Commons, American Popular Culture Commons, Art Education Commons, Comparative Literature Commons, Creative Writing Commons, Curriculum and Instruction Commons, Educational Assessment, Evaluation, and Research Commons, Educational Methods Commons, Educational Psychology Commons, Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons, Higher Education Commons, Illustration Commons, Interdisciplinary Arts and Media Commons, Rhetoric and Composition Commons, and the Visual Studies Commons

Recommended Citation
Lawrence, Julian; Lin, Ching-Chiu; and Irwin, Rita (2017) "Images, Speech Balloons, and Artful Representation: Comics as Visual Narratives of Early Career Teachers," *SANE journal: Sequential Art Narrative in Education*: Vol. 2 : Iss. 2 , Article 3.
Available at: http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/sane/vol2/iss2/3

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in SANE journal: Sequential Art Narrative in Education by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Images, Speech Balloons, and Artful Representation: Comics as Visual Narratives of Early Career Teachers

Cover Page Footnote
Pedagogical Assemblage: Building and Sustaining Teacher Capacity through Mentoring Programs in British Columbia is a research partnership project funded by Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) of Canada. It brings together the shared interests of the Teacher Education Office (TEO) at the University of British Columbia (UBC), the British Columbia Ministry of Education, the British Columbia School Superintendents' Association (BCSSA), and the British Columbia Teachers' Federation (BCTF) to address the need for promoting, building and sustaining a professional culture of collaboration through teacher mentoring in the context of the British Columbia K-12 public education system. For more information, visit mentoringbc.ca

This article is available in SANE journal: Sequential Art Narrative in Education: http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/sane/vol2/iss2/3

The ways in which teachers adjust to challenges in the process of becoming professionals are complicated. Interestingly, we have come to understand how the use of comics permits an unfolding of visual narratives within sequential frames as a unique way of contextualizing stories of teaching and learning. These visual narratives enable educational professionals to grasp the complexities of their professional actions and decisions through the unity created between form and content. This article discusses findings from a Canadian research project: *Pedagogical Assemblage: Building and Sustaining Teacher Capacity through Mentoring Programs in British Columbia*[1]. It explores the implications of comics as a mode of inquiry into teachers' stories of professional challenges and growth, by exploring the potential of comics for articulating and producing teacher narratives about issues of professional practice as encountered by early career teachers in British Columbia, Canada. Specifically, it focuses on using a/r/tography informed research methods in teacher mentorship through the development, creation and dissemination of comics. Central to this inquiry is the premise that visual representation through comics can provide teaching practitioners a reflexive and imaginative outlook into early career teachers' stories, and thus invite readers to ponder their own stories of becoming teachers in conversation with others. By employing a/r/tography informed research in the area of teacher mentorship within education, we hope to inspire further conversations in interdisciplinary venues by provoking discussions and creating new spaces for arts-based educational research in a broader educational arena.

A Brief History of Comics and Education

Growing recognition of comics in the broad field of education has been evidenced through the implications of comic books, manga and graphic novels in various teaching and learning settings across diverse age levels (Bitz, 2010, 2015; Kraver, 2013). Comics and cartooning as tools in education have a history that can be traced back to the early 19th century under the pen of Swiss schoolteacher, Rudolph Töpffer (Smolderen, 2014). Soon after the form of comic books emerged in the early 1930s, extensive studies of comics in the classroom were initiated and

[1] *Pedagogical Assemblage: Building and Sustaining Teacher Capacity through Mentoring Programs in British Columbia* is a research partnership project funded by Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) of Canada. It brings together the shared interests of the Teacher Education Office (TEO) at the University of British Columbia (UBC), the British Columbia Ministry of Education, the British Columbia School Superintendents' Association (BCSSA), and the British Columbia Teachers' Federation (BCTF) to address the need for promoting, building and sustaining a professional culture of collaboration through teacher mentoring in the context of the British Columbia K-12 public education system. For more information, visit mentoringbc.ca

encouraging analyses linking comics to improved literacy appeared in journal articles throughout the *Golden Age of Comics* (Sones, 1944; Zorbaugh, 1944; Frank, 1949; Makey, 1952). However, falsified data produced by child psychologist Fredric Wertham (1954) linked comics to juvenile delinquency (Dorrell, Curtis, & Rampal, 1995; Tilley, 2012), and led to a virtual ban of comics in education. Ignored almost universally by elites and academia in North America during the *Silver Age* of the 1950s and 60s (Dorrell et al., 1995; Williams, 2008; Groensteen, 2012; Tilley, 2012, 2014), the comics medium nonetheless provoked scholarly undertakings in parts of Europe. For example, in 1962, burgeoning Franco-Belgian comics scholars and educators declared *les bandes dessinées* (the French term for comics, translated literally as *drawn strips*) to be the *ninth art* (Miller, 2007; Miller & Beaty, 2008; Groensteen, 2007, 2008) and acknowledged the medium's aesthetic and pedagogical capabilities (Andre, 1965; Fresnault-Deruelle, 1972; Roux, 1970).

During the 1960s and early 1970s, a market for adult comics was developing in France, which led to the creation of sequential narrative magazines and albums that portrayed mature themes such as sex and politics (Miller, 2007). Similarly, on the other side of the Atlantic, the *Underground Comix* movement in the United States provided revolutionary new understandings of comics in North America (Estren, 1974; Goldweber, 2013) due to their authors' "general defiance of convention and authority" (Goldweber, 2013, para. 1). The *Bronze Age of Comics* (1970–1985) spawned the phenomenon of the *graphic novel* (Williams, 2008) in America, a literary form which can be traced back to the European albums such as Franco-Belgian cartoonist Hergé's comic *Tintin in the Land of the Soviets* (2007) which was published in 1930.

During the *Modern Age* (1986 to 1999) the popular phenomenon of Japanese comics, known as *manga,* exploded across North America and Europe (Goldstein & Phelan, 2009; Groensteen, 2013). Growing academic acceptance of comics occurred in France during the 1980s (Groensteen, 2007; Miller, 2007, Williams, 2008) as left-leaning governments began funding "an apparatus of legitimization" (Miller, 2007, p. 31) that consisted of comics conferences, salons and schools. Additionally, early scholarship and theorizing on comics appeared in North America during the Modern Age, particularly after the success of *Maus* in 1992, which created new openings and understandings of comics as "a form of literature" (Groensteen, 2013, p. 76) and medium of self-expression (Bitz, 2009). Recently, a growing canon of scholarly works (Ayers & Alexander-Tanner, 2010; Madrid-Manrique, 2015; Sousanis, 2015) has signaled the cultural legitimacy of the medium.

Comics scholarship is a growing phenomenon, however the literature shows that current educational studies involving comic books and graphic novels predominantly employ them for reading in research of classroom literacy or

scholarly theorizing (Pratt, 2009; Syma & Weiner, 2013; Bahl, 2015) rather than creating comics texts as modes for meaning making. For instance, educator Jeraldine Kraver writes "we need to understand how the mode itself involves what …Scott McCloud calls 'making' comics… rather than scattershot approaches used to incorporate comics into discrete classroom lessons." (Kraver, 2013, p. 3) Therefore, we argue that understandings of "the language of comics" (Groensteen, 2007, p. 3) improve when scholars become writers *as well as readers* of comics, for it can be understood that literacy negotiates relationships between reading and writing (Collins & Blot, 2003). Although educator Michael Bitz's comprehensive *Comic Book Project* (2004, 2009, 2010, 2015) examines comics as a medium of self-expression by analyzing comics created by elementary and high school students, little research on comics in relation to education has explored the medium's potentiality for communicating and interpreting complex issues around teaching and learning (Pratt, 2009; Syma & Weiner, 2013; Bahl, 2015; Kraver, 2015). Furthermore, while certain educational uses of comics encourage children's self expression and learning (Bitz, 2009, 2010, 2015; Morrison et al., 2002), there is a lack of research demonstrating comics as a form of knowledge representation in relation to narratives of professional learning.

Feminist researcher Stephanie Jones explores her professional development as a scholar through arts based comics research, which she calls "graphica" (Jones & Woglom, 2013, p. 169). Jones, in collaboration with artist/educator James Woglom, tells "the story of how I came to present my research through a visual medium" (p. 169) and her discovery that research with comics "is a laborious but a generative one that allows me to think about research in a completely different way- through visual creation - that isn't limited to the language of words" (p. 188). Therefore, as comic's researchers, we draw inspiration from the growing number of emergent texts in comic forms that challenge conventional representations of academic research. In this article, we intend to explore and provoke new understandings of comics through our research in teacher mentorship. In ways similar to Bitz and Jones & Woglom, we employ comics as an artistic form within a/r/tography to analyze data and present new understandings. What follows is a discussion of teacher narratives and professional growth through the possibilities of comics.

Teacher Mentorship and Teacher Narratives

Teacher mentorship is key to creating and sustaining a strong profession of teaching (Kutsyuruba, 2012; Kutsyuruba, Godden, Matheson & Walker, 2016). Rather than seeing mentoring as an authoritative relationship between experienced and early career teachers, we consider mentoring as an interdependent and collaborative relationship in which teachers learn together to

inquire and refine their practice. Hence the experience of mentoring can be seen as a pedagogical space that attends to "a range of variations, directions, and destinations" (Ellsworth, 2005, p. 121) and enables the continuous unfolding of unexpectedness that provokes new possibilities. Such a space allows us to attend to the complexity of teacher mentorship, shifting the focus from the individual incidents of being competent to the relational practices where one teacher's growth evolves in the presence of another (Lin, Lawrence, & Irwin, 2016).

To articulate this complexity, we turn to teachers' narratives as they are "culturally provided stories about selves and their passage through lives that provide resources drawn upon by individuals in their interactions with one another and with themselves" (Sachs, 2003; p. 132). Narratives, as Gergen and Gergen (1988) point out, are "in effect, social constructions, undergoing continuous alteration as interaction progresses" (p. 20). Similarly, Groensteen (2012) writes that comics are constructed by drawing "instantaneous exchanges between text and image" (p.116), which he calls "narrative drawing" (p. 118). The narratives reveal teachers' unique professional experiences that entangle past memories and future aspirations. Thus, the narrative of becoming teachers is a framework for knowledge construction and sharing in teacher development because "stories provide a compelling basis for change or for affirmations" (Sachs, 2003, p. 132). Teachers' narratives help create a sense of collective belonging that connects teachers through "stories of practice" (Jalongo & Isenberg, 1995, p. 9) that enable communication and reflection (Clandinin & Connelly, 1998; Clandinin, 2006). However, for those teachers who are new to the profession and located in remote school communities, their stories of practice are often overlooked or silenced, leaving teachers to feel isolated in school communities and experience a low sense of belonging to the profession.

We contend that one method of overcoming the challenges of isolation faced by new teachers in rural communities is to expand the avenues of communication through comics. It is observed that narratives told in comic texts supplement collective belonging through their "easy locus for participatory culture" (Tilley, 2014, p. 3). Furthermore, as we consider narratives as social constructions that encompass the ambiguity and fluidity of becoming teachers, we contend that comics, as a visual narrative medium and form, are well suited to capture such complexity in both form and content. For instance, Jones & Woglom (2013) observe, "the composition and consumption of comics, then, might present a means of fostering comprehension of pluralistic points of view in a complex world." (p. 187) We now turn to our research to discuss our inquiry into comics as a unique narrative space for new teachers to articulate their teacher practice and growth, as well as a reciprocal space for the development of professional learning communities.

Methodology

An a/r/tographic informed methodology[2] suits the nature of this study, as it attends to the knowledge production space in-between research, art, and practice by underlining "a critical exchange that is reflective, responsive, and relational" (Irwin & Springgay, 2008, p. 106). It is a/r/tographically informed as we are immersed in a collaborative research team environment that is informed by the practice based nature of a/r/tographic research. Our participants are actively engaged in our qualitative research data collection (e.g. video/audio interviews) but are not actively engaged in a/r/tographic practices due to the sheer number of participants. In our case, comics as a form of creative arts serves as a mode of inquiry, as well as a form of knowledge representation, and provides insights into early career teacher's practice and growth. The methodology provides us an appropriate positioning to produce new relationships between creative arts and knowledge through biographical sequential narratives as research inquiry, collaboration and outputs.

Our data collection methods included semi-structured interviews as well as document reviews. We asked teachers in their first three years of teaching to share their experiences with the local districts' mentorship programs, and used documents provided by the teachers (e.g., photographs, lesson plans, and curriculum guidelines) to structure our interviews. Under the narrative analysis strategy (Cortazzi, 2014), we developed themes and identified narrative patterns as inquiry stances to lead our exploration of the essence of the stories. The sequentials generated in this study are supported by Democratic and Hierarchical Grids (Brunetti, 2011) and are similar to the pages of old *Archie* comics, thus "highly conventionalized in terms of look, layout, and design" (Beaty, 2015, p. 9) with a basic network of six panels of equal size dividing each page. The panels' signifieds employ basic comics grammar, such as insistent characters, speech balloons, and captions. The cartooning that transforms the teachers' stories into sequential narratives involves understandings of comics' semiotic systems (Lim, 2007; Groensteen, 2007) and of the professional practices in *Applied Cartooning* (Sturm & Bennett, 2014).

Following the data analysis stage, the script of each teacher's story was compiled by the lead researcher, and then drawn in thumbnail sketches created by

[2] A/r/tography is a form of practice-based research steeped in the arts and education. A/r/t ography "renders research inquiries through artistic means" (Irwin, 2004, p.1). To practice a/r/togtaphy "is to inquire into a phenomenon through an ongoing process of artmaking and writing while acknowledging one's role as artist (a), researcher(r), teacher (t)" (Irwin, 2004, p. 1). A/r/tography is inherently about self as artist/researcher/teacher yet it is also social when groups or communities of a/r/tographers come together to engage in shared inquiries, act as critical friends, articulate an evolution of research questions, and present their collective evocative/provocative works to others.

the comics artist/researcher. Examples of thumbnail sketches created for *Katrina's Story: Mentorship Confidential* are featured in Figure 1. The lead researcher consulted with each participating teacher for accuracy, flow of sequence and narrative messages. The comics artist/researcher then strengthened the narrative, by making any necessary revisions or adjustments in the penciling and lettering stage (Fig. 2). The pencil drawings were again forwarded to the participant for feedback. Upon approval from the participant, the comics artist/researcher completed the art and text by inking and coloring (Fig. 3). The final artwork reached its completion once the participant again reviewed and approved.

It is worth noting that teacher anonymity is critical to this study. A number of the participating teachers expressed concern that some of the challenges they discuss in their comics could have implications on their careers, especially for those located in small rural communities. Therefore we employed pseudonyms and cartoon avatars (McCloud, 1994; Whitlock, 2006) to maintain participant anonymity. In other words, teachers tell stories, share experiences and communicate meanings as cartoon characters in comics. To make sure participants' voices are appropriately presented, our team members engaged in a long process of triangulating key data sources (e.g., interviews and field notes) and member checks.

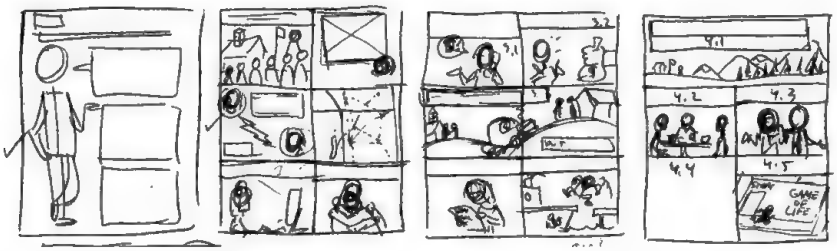


Fig. 1. Rough thumbnails created for Katrina's Story.

I ALSO STARTED CONTACTING AND QUESTIONING SPECIFIC PEOPLE WITHIN OUR DISTRICT ABOUT FUNDS FOR MENTORSHIP PURPOSES.
$?
MY WORRY SURROUNDING THE ABSENCE OF THESE FUNDS WAS SUBSIDED WHEN I WAS ADVISED BY A LOCAL PRO-D CHAIR THAT I COULD USE MY PRO-D FUNDS TO VISIT OTHER RURAL SCHOOLS.
AFTER TALKING WITH TWO RURAL TEACHERS, VISITING THEIR SCHOOLS, AND OBSERVING THEIR PROGRAMS AND STUDENTS, I NOTICED MY NEED FOR SELF-AFFIRMATION BEING FULFILLED..
BUT, MY THIRST FOR OBSERVATIONAL AND COLLABORATIVE OPPORTUNITIES WITH SEASONED TEACHERS WAS NOT QUENCHED.
EARLY INTO MY SECOND YEAR OF TEACHING, I WAS INFORMED ABOUT OUR DISTRICT'S PARTICIPATION IN THE NEW TEACHER MENTORING PROJECT...
AND I JUMPED RIGHT ABOARD!
NEW TEACHER MENTORING PROJECT

Fig. 2. Pencils created for Katrina's Story, Page 3.

I ALSO STARTED CONTACTING AND QUESTIONING SPECIFIC PEOPLE WITHIN OUR DISTRICT ABOUT FUNDS FOR MENTORSHIP PURPOSES.
$?
MY WORRY SURROUNDING THE ABSENCE OF THESE FUNDS WAS SUBSIDED WHEN I WAS ADVISED BY A LOCAL PRO-D CHAIR THAT I COULD USE MY PRO-D FUNDS TO VISIT OTHER RURAL SCHOOLS.
$
AFTER TALKING WITH TWO RURAL TEACHERS, VISITING THEIR SCHOOLS, AND OBSERVING THEIR PROGRAMS AND STUDENTS, I NOTICED MY NEED FOR SELF-AFFIRMATION BEING FULFILLED...
BUT, MY THIRST FOR OBSERVATIONAL AND COLLABORATIVE OPPORTUNITIES WITH SEASONED TEACHERS WAS NOT QUENCHED.
EARLY INTO MY SECOND YEAR OF TEACHING, I WAS INFORMED ABOUT OUR DISTRICT'S PARTICIPATION IN THE NEW TEACHER MENTORING PROJECT...
THE MENTOR
AND I JUMPED RIGHT ABOARD!
NEW TEACHER MENTORING PROJECT

Fig. 3. Inks and colours created for Katrina's Story, Page 3.

Blending Comics and Curricular Languages through Comics

With the intention of offering a coherent understanding of the teachers' comics, we first provide a macro analysis by investigating the possibility of merging comics and curricular languages in light of our mentorship comics; then continue with a micro analysis showcasing one of the stories in order to provide a closer look at our collaborative research process.

Comics scholar/practitioner Ivan Brunetti posits that the "empathetic doodling" (Horsman, 2015, p. 149) of cartooning is discovered in what he terms

the "*Five C's of Cartooning*" (Brunetti, 2011, p. 25): *composition; consistency; communication; calligraphy;* and *clarity*. Pedagogical links are forged by blending Brunetti's Five C's with curriculum theorist Dwayne Huebner's five-value framework for curricular language, which consists of: *technical; scientific; political; esthetic*; and *ethics* (Huebner et al., 1999, pp. 106-111). Definitions of curriculum cover a number of areas but, in the field of education, it can essentially be understood as "experience" (Breault & Marshall, 2010, para. 8) whereby the root word, *currere* (Pinar, 1975), propels "curriculum as verb instead of a noun" (Irwin, 2010, para. 1). As such, circumstances can be created in which to provoke broader experience and communication within communities of learning. Thus the circumstances created for our study materialize as interviews, field notes, workshops and biographical comics with which to share new teacher experiences. We suggest that blending empathetic and applied cartooning (Brunetti, 2011; Sturm & Bennett, 2014; Horsman, 2015) with thoughtful and considered curriculum theorizing (Huebner et al., 1999) can open opportunities for sharing and collaboration amongst educational stakeholders. Therefore, a pairing of Brunetti and Huebner's ten protocols into five groups of two can be visualized as: Technical/Composition; Political/Communication; Scientific/Consistency; Esthetic/Calligraphy and Ethical/Clarity.

Technical / Composition.

The Technical aspect of Huebner's value system with its "mobilization of material" (Huebner et al., 1999, p. 106) can be paired with Composition in cartooning. For instance, consider a comics page and the compositional considerations inside each of its panels' frames. These considerations include, but are not limited to, the placement of captions and speech balloons, camera angles and background displays, while "some effort of efficiency is made" (p. 106) towards a form of quality control. A Technical/Composition pairing of comics and curricular language addresses the "iconic solidarity" (Groensteen, 2007, p. 18) of the comics page whereby

> (e)valuation, from the point of view of the technical value system, may be considered a type of quality control…Evaluation, or inspection, also serves to check the quality of activities in the producing sequence. These activities may be improved or altered if the end states are not what they should be. (Huebner et al., 1999, p. 107)

Furthermore Thierry Groensteen (2007), in his *System of Comics*, writes that the comics page's composition or "mise en scène, therefore, organizes the different parameters of the image… in accordance with the internal dynamic of the sequence" (p. 120). For example, Page 1 of *Jenni's Story: Paperwork* (Fig. 4)

applies technical and compositional elements that involve braiding (Groensteen, 2007) of *Associating Elements* (AE) and *Visual Linking Devices* (VLD) (Lim, 2004, 2007) into relationships that engage the reader. These include visual metaphors of the story's title such as the stacks of paper to signify the large amount of paperwork this teacher encountered, and the inclusion of an insistent character as VLD, namely the teacher, Jenni, herself.

Fig. 4. Page 1 of Jenni's Story.

Political / Communication.

Political valuing exists "more often covertly than overtly" (Huebner et al., 1999, p. 107) in curricular thought and yet, as Huebner et al. writes, "all educational activity is valued politically" (p. 108). Victor Lim Fei (2004, 2007) posits, with the *Integrative Multi-Semiotic Model* (IMM) that for comics analysis, it is ideology that lays at the foundation of a comics text. The ideological framework of a comic is presented semiotically and deciphered through the language and images situated within the work's *Expression, Content* and *Context Planes*. The canon of significant graphic novels includes a number of works that contain both overt and covert political messages (Beaty & Woo, 2016) such as Art Spiegelman's (2011) *Maus* and Marjane Satrapi's (2007) *Persepolis*. Jenni's Story presents the central theme of broader communication when, on Page 1 (Fig. 4), the character of Jenni breaks the fourth wall and speaks directly to the reader. This is an approach that acknowledges a political *écriture féminine* (Cixous & Clément, 1986; Taylor, 2013) that strives to communicate with the other, as when Helene Cixous advises authors to attend "to the gaps" (Sellers, 1996, p. 16). This attention to the gaps can refer not only to the gutters between the contiguous panels of the comics page, but in the liminal spaces between author and other, writer and reader. As such, a comics author invites the reader into the narrative by writing beyond the self. The direct communication Jenni's character extends to the reader braids (Groensteen, 2007, 2013) and flows (Lim, 2007) with the narrative when, on the last page (Fig. 5), Jenni is once again speaking directly to the reader through a megaphone.

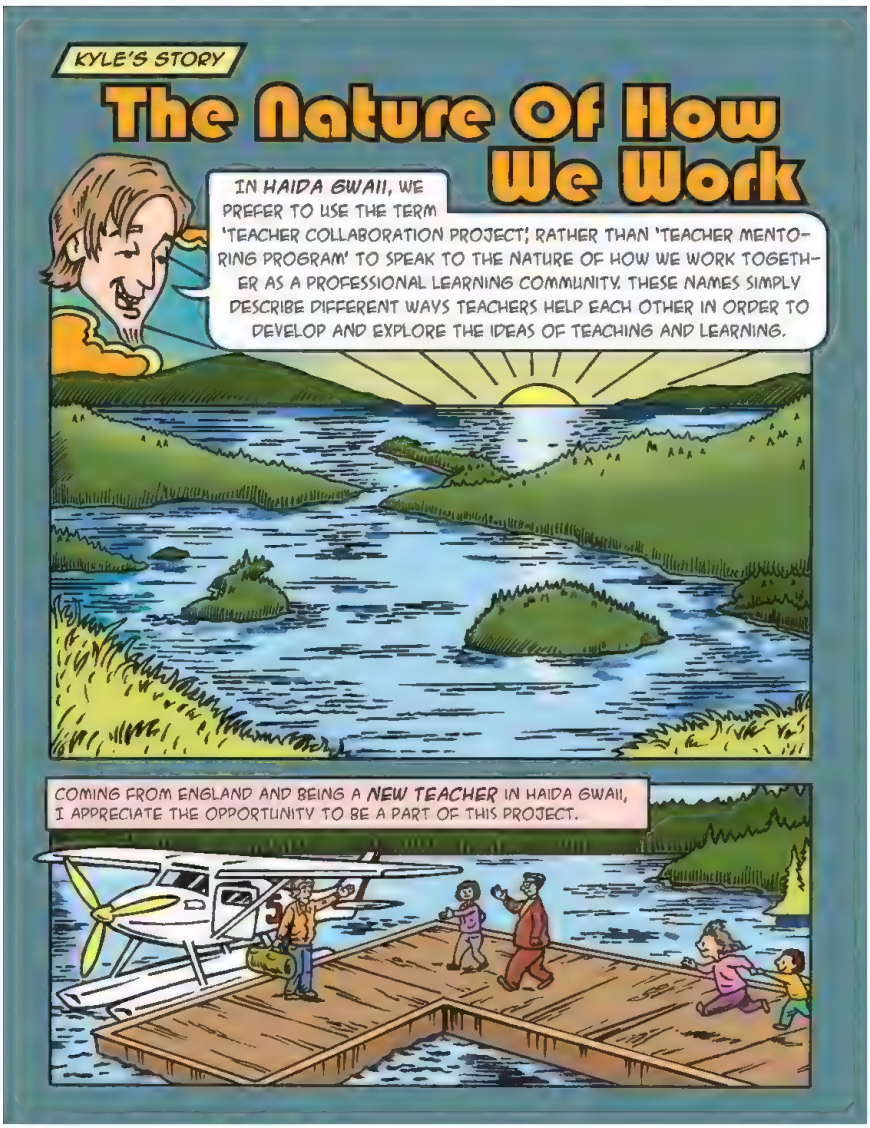
MENTORSHIP
HOWEVER, MOST OF MY COLLEAGUES DON'T KNOW MUCH ABOUT THE MENTORING PROGRAM, BUT THOSE I HAVE ASKED SAY THEY WOULD HAVE LOVED TO JOIN IF THEY HAD BEEN AWARE OF IT. I ENCOURAGE MY COLLEAGUES TO GET INVOLVED AS I BELIEVE TEACHER MENTORSHIP IS AN EFFECTIVE APPROACH TO ONGOING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT.
MENTORSHIP
THIS PROGRAM HAS BEEN ABSOLUTELY INVALUABLE FOR ME FOR THE PAST TWO YEARS. THE SUPPORT, KNOWLEDGE, AND CONFIDENCE I HAVE GAINED THROUGH THIS PROGRAM HAS ALLOWED ME TO BECOME MORE QUALIFIED AND EFFICIENT AS A LEARNING SUPPORT TEACHER.
This research was supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) through a Partnership Development Grant entitled: Pedagogical Assemblage: Building and sustaining teacher capacity through mentoring programs in British Columbia (Rita Irwin, principal investigator; Julian Lawrence & Ching-Chiu Lin, researchers).
ART: BY JULIAN LAWRENCE
Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada
Conseil de recherches en sciences humaines du Canada
Canada

Fig. 5. Page 4 of Jenni's Story.

Scientific / Consistency.

Scientific valuing is important to Huebner as new discoveries and "more precise knowledge" (Huebner et al., 1999, p. 109) become incorporated into the curriculum. He also writes that "educational activity may be valued for the knowledge it produces about that activity" (p. 108). For instance, the comics produced for the *Pedagogical Assemblage* project generated new understandings of teacher mentorship as we prospected the data for information with which to build narratives. As such, Kyle's Story features an interesting observation in the establishing shot of Figure 6/Panel 1. Kyle is depicted as a disembodied head floating above the story's setting and narrating to the reader, "In Haida Gwai, we

prefer to use the term 'Teacher Collaboration Project' rather than 'Teacher Mentoring Program'". Substituting *mentoring* with *collaboration* complicates and questions understandings of mentorship as professional practice. Additionally, Kyle enlarges his perceptions of mentorship and collaboration by describing the acquisition of new art techniques, which he incorporates into his art and teaching practice. Furthermore, images of Kyle's art are also situated visually within the sequential narrative's rhizome. Thus a satisfying and consistent sense of wholeness develops through multimodal communication amongst a team of researchers, teachers, and artists.


KYLE'S STORY
The Nature Of How We Work
IN HAIDA GWAII, WE PREFER TO USE THE TERM 'TEACHER COLLABORATION PROJECT' RATHER THAN 'TEACHER MENTORING PROGRAM' TO SPEAK TO THE NATURE OF HOW WE WORK TOGETHER AS A PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY. THESE NAMES SIMPLY DESCRIBE DIFFERENT WAYS TEACHERS HELP EACH OTHER IN ORDER TO DEVELOP AND EXPLORE THE IDEAS OF TEACHING AND LEARNING.
COMING FROM ENGLAND AND BEING A NEW TEACHER IN HAIDA GWAII, I APPRECIATE THE OPPORTUNITY TO BE A PART OF THIS PROJECT.
Fig. 6. Page 1 of Kyle's Story.

Esthetic / Calligraphy.

Huebner et al. (1999) write that esthetic valuing "is often completely ignored, perhaps because… esthetic activities are not highly prized today in society" (p. 109). He identifies three dimensions of Esthetic valuing: psychical distance (which is an apartness from materiality and consumption); wholeness and design; and symbolic meaning. Meanwhile, Brunetti (2011) states that the qualities of calligraphy in cartooning "are a clue as to what makes one's particular visual handwriting different or unique, and these should be embraced" (p. 26). Brunetti's approach to cartooning involves "simplicity, clarity and elegance" (p. 34) as goals. He writes that, "we experience the comics page both as a whole and as a sum of its parts: moreover, 'form' and 'content' are not just inseparable, but actually originate inter-dependently" (p. 45). Huebner et al. (1999) write, "the esthetic object may be valued for the meanings that it reveals" (p. 110). While composing Page 3 of Kyle's Story (Fig. 7), the comics a/r/tographer requested an example of the teacher's artwork. The teacher was delighted and provided several images of works he had created while teaching in a rural British Columbia community. Thus two examples of Kyle's work (Figs. 7 & 8) are situated esthetically within the calligraphy of the pages.

I WANTED TO EXPLORE AN INQUIRY QUESTION OF HOW I COULD TEACH CULTURALLY SENSITIVE PROCESSES AND USES OF ART IN MY CLASSROOM BASED ON A CULTURE THAT IS NOT MY OWN.
I HAVE LEARNED SO MUCH ABOUT THE PROPER USE OF HAIDA FORMLINE...
... THUS BEING ABLE TO OFFER THAT KNOWLEDGE TO MY STUDENTS.
THEY ASSISTED ME TO PRACTICE CULTURALLY APPROPRIATE LESSONS. OVER TIME, I HAVE OBSERVED THAT STUDENTS RESPECTED THE FACT THAT THE HAIDA TEACHERS ARE BEING INVITED IN MY ART CLASS AND THAT I'M INVITED INTO THEIRS. WE HAVE HELPED EACH OTHER TO PROVIDE STUDENTS WITH MORE LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES.

Fig. 7. Page 3 of Kyle's Story.

THIS PROGRAM MAKES TEACHER COLLABORATION ACKNOWLEDGED IN SCHOOLS - TEACHERS REALIZE THERE IS A STRUCTURE IN PLACE THAT ENCOURAGES YOU TO COLLABORATE WITH OTHER TEACHERS. IT GIVES TEACHERS A STARTING POINT, NOT JUST TO HELP EACH OTHER, BUT ALSO TO CONNECT AND LEARN TOGETHER.
WITHOUT THE TEACHER COLLABORATION PROJECT, TEACHERS WOULD BE STRAINED FOR TIME.
2:00 AM
THIS PROJECT GIVES ME THE OPPORTUNITY TO BE MINDFUL AND REFLECTIVE ABOUT MY TEACHING. IT ALSO ALLOWS TEACHERS IN HAIDA GWAII TO FOSTER A CULTURE OF COLLABORATION...
... WHERE WE LEARN TOGETHER TO IMPROVE AND REFINE OUR PRACTICES.
ART: BY JULIAN LAWRENCE
This research was supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) through a Partnership Development Grant entitled: Pedagogical Assemblage: Building and sustaining teacher capacity through mentoring programs in British Columbia (Rita Irwin, principal investigator; Julian Lawrence & Ching-Chiu Lin, researchers).
Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada
Conseil de recherches en sciences humaines du Canada
Canada
Fig. 8. Page 4 of Kyle's Story.

Ethical / Clarity.

Ethical value in curriculum, according to Huebner et al. (1999), "is viewed primarily as an encounter between man and man" (p. 110) whereby the "student is not viewed as an object, as an *it*; but as a fellow human being" (p.110, italics in original). Similarly, Sellers (1996) reminds us of feminist scholar Hélène Cixous' advice that writers avoid solipsism and attend "to the gaps" (p. 16) in order to "prevent constructing the self in a position of mastery" (p. 16). Therefore, comics' scholars/practitioners "must take care not to jar the reader out of the narrative, inadvertently severing the reader's identification or empathy with the character(s) or story" (Brunetti, 2011, p. 49). For example, the character of Jenni shares her vulnerability with the reader by expressing her feelings, as well as describing the

methods she employs to overcome the challenges she encounters in her profession. Through Jenni's Story we discover that asking questions, networking with colleagues, and keeping communication open are some of the ways by which new teachers can grow professionally.

Our macro analysis merges comic and curricular theorizing in an attempt to present teachers' narratives through "the connections between images and written language to form a broader communicative whole" (Cohn, 2016, p. 7). Our discussion shows that the intersection of comics and curricular languages enables us to understand teacher narratives from a fresh perspective, as well as to connect with the broader audience in professional learning communities. The collaborative comics we created are designed to share and communicate new teachers' experiences in rural school communities. The teachers' narratives benefit from cartooning's "empathetic doodling" (Horsman, 2015, p. 149) and communicate reflexively and reflectively with the reader. Furthermore, applying a curricular value-system to a comics' ideology, whereby "knowledge has more than power, it has beauty" (Huebner et al., 1999, p.116), enriches discourse and opens avenues to explore complexities of teacher practice. In the following micro analysis, we focus our lens on one new teacher's experience and the techniques we employ to communicate his story in comics.

The Portrayal of Kyle's Story

The *Applied Cartooning Manifesto* asks, "What if our work is about not only a sense of identity… But also a sense of community?" (Sturm & Bennett, 2014, n.p.) The theme of building community through cartooning and collaboration emerges in the narratives of the Pedagogical Assemblage project's comics, which opens new possibilities for scholarly research (Beaty, 2011; Baetens, 2013). These biographical comic stories permit researchers and practitioners to unpack and understand the complexity of teacher mentorship through the images, texts, and multimodal engagements of comics. As a result, the sequential narratives contribute as a form of inquiry into these contextualized understandings of teacher collaboration through the mentoring program. The following case study showcases a sequential narrative developed from Kyle's interviews, stories and collaborations.

Kyle's story, which is entitled *The Nature Of How We Work*, details the experience of a first year secondary visual art teacher. The narrative explains Kyle's participation in his school district's teacher mentorship program in the remote Indigenous community of Haida Gwaii, British Columbia, Canada. Following a reading of the pages' words and images, Kyle's reflection, in the final panel of Figure 8, provides a space that invites teachers to contemplate their own teaching in the early years of practice and appreciate the richness of teaching

in rural school communities. In Figure 6/Panel 1, Kyle says, "in Haida Gwaii, we prefer the term 'Teacher Collaboration Project' rather than 'Teacher Mentoring Program' to speak to the nature of how we work together as a professional learning community." We find ourselves therefore questioning the uses of language around the discourse of teacher mentorship, especially when deeper analysis reveals the non-hierarchical, reciprocal and collaborative characteristics embedded in Kyle's experience. Thus, comics provide a narrative space to articulate this unique way of rethinking teacher mentorship through teachers' authentic stories.

Our research team's analysis of the data begins with an attentive reading and transcription of Kyle's interviews. The original verbatim transcript numbers fourteen single-spaced pages and our team works together to extract the "nuggets of information" (Anderson & Thomas, 2014, p. 1) nestled in the raw data. In this way the pages are edited into a 500-word narrative whereby themes and new understandings are brought into sharper focus. For example, through a team effort the second edit of Kyle's interview transcript clarifies the importance of the aforementioned "teacher collaboration" and highlights the core value of collaborative inquiry embedded in Haida Gwaii's teacher mentoring program. Kyle, as well as other participating teachers, are considered in the texts as the author's "fictitious speaker: the author function is carried out and operates in the scission itself" (Foucault, 1998, p. 215) of the narrative. In this research, teachers' interviews are transcribed and adapted into comics whereby their voices are communicated through the mask of an avatar or cipher such as a cartoon character. The hybrid teachers/characters in our research comics narrate "meaningful dimensions of their worlds when they can explore them through creative arts, including comic books" (Bitz, 2004, p. 575) in print and online (www.mentoringbc.ca). In other words, teachers' voices communicate playfully as anonymous cartoon characters sharing lifeworld experiences with each other and the reader.

Another example is found in Figure 7/panel 2. This particular panel ruptures the established cartooning protocols of the narrative to present a photograph of Kyle's artwork. The hybridity of comics allows for text and image to complement and reinforce underlying themes. As such, a representation of Kyle's artwork serves to reinforce and support the narrative. Kyle explains in the text that he has "learned so much about the proper use of Haida formline…Thus being able to offer that knowledge to my students." Kyle's words are positioned as two captions that surround a photograph of his Haida-inspired work. We can untangle the complexity by pointing to this new avenue of collaboration whereby teacher generated art embellishes and adds to the comic's sequential narrative and discourse semantics (Lim, 2007). In this instance, the participating teacher, Kyle, was happy to supply art and forwarded several examples for our team to include

in the comics. Beyond supplying narrative text, Kyle's artwork serves as a critical visual clue that helps readers to understand the social and cultural elements that underlie the entanglement of professional collaboration and teacher mentorship. This mode of comics production provokes a conversation about *collective authorship* in which a team of contributors is representative of the collective voice of the artwork (Groensteen, 2012; Rippl & Etter, 2013; Uidhr, 2012). Kyle's experience of mentoring is transformed into comics by transcribing, editing, sketching, thumbnailing, penciling, revising, lettering, inking, colouring, laying out, printing, and uploading as sequential narratives. Participating teachers like Kyle collaborated throughout the entire process by offering feedback and ideas with each iteration. This collective effort allows us to recognize the collaborative action required in the networks of professional learning communities, thereby inviting teachers to reflect upon and learn about their practices.

Audience Responses of Teacher Mentorship Comics

To understand comics' potentiality in the research areas of teacher mentorship, we turn to audience response to discuss how comics can be utilized to support and strengthen teachers' professional growth. We incorporate feedback from the teachers we portrayed, as well as teachers and school administrators who had read the comics.

Inviting and Articulating Reflection through Comics

Teachers' memories of their first few years of teaching can be a collective experience, yet these memories are rarely shared among all teachers. Some teachers might feel that sharing such stories is a sign of weakness or incompetency, whereas some could not find the right channel to tell their stories. Katrina (Figs. 1-3) was willing to share her story with us because the form of comics gives her an anonymous voice. In other words, the comic form provides a safe space for Katrina to take a reflective stance on her first year of teaching and offers a solution to her dilemma. Thus Katrina's fear of being potentially identified and her desire to share her struggle and change with other teachers who may have similar experiences in their early career phases are reconciled through the anonymity and discursive strengths of comics. As a result, Katrina's comic story was well-received and was published as a condensed two-page version in *British Columbia Teachers' Federation Magazine* in 2015 (with a circulation of 50,000 copies).

We have gained momentum as Katrina's story helped invite additional early career teachers to participate in our study. When informed that teachers have been inspired by her sequential narrative about her practice, Katrina said, "I know how isolated and powerless it could be for the first year of teaching. I'm glad new

teachers out there can relate to my story, that they are not alone, and there is support out there (personal communication, January, 2015)." In a sense, Katrina's comic story reveals a unique dimension of community building through cartooning whereby a sense of belonging develops when the narratives of community members are voiced, exchanged and communicated. This unique sense of community then becomes intensified through the potential of comics. We can characterize these potentials as accessibility and reflexivity.

Accessibility is the most common theme that has emerged from our analysis; comics' accessibility enables the need for advocacy in promoting and strengthening teacher mentorship. As Devon, a district mentoring coordinator puts it, "Comics tends to be a more playful medium: it's accessible and welcoming, rather than if it's a very academic, structured format that seems untouchable and authoritarian." She elaborates,

> When you're working in mentorship advocacy and awareness, you're often working with trustees, policy makers, or administrators who probably don't have much background knowledge in these areas. Having something that is accessible and concise to ground the conversation around the issues is crucial (Devon, personal communication, July, 2016).

While Devon considers mentoring comics as a tool to spark conversation with administrators, Karen, an elementary teacher appreciates the vibrancy that comics bring to the teaching profession. She says,

> It's almost surprising when you open it up and oh wow, it's a comic. It's concise and feels you are on a journey with that person. You understand the message and the reality of those new teachers' situations, but in a way it's fun and energetic and encourages you to rethink the negativity of that experience. It's a fairly quick read and yet you still have that deep understanding because you could relate to their struggles or experiences as a teacher. Having something that has a meaningful message but in a lighter format is just refreshing and appreciated (Karen, personal communication, July, 2016).

The accessibility feature of new teachers' comics thus reveals the reflexive nature of teacher narratives, in which they make sense both to the individuals who voice their stories and to others who may identify similar experiences (Noddings, 1991; Sachs, 2003). In fact, the blended text and visual narratives appear to intensify the reflexivity that the reader has experienced. The cartoon representations of characters and locations invite readers to reimagine, and thus share their own stories with the larger teaching community. Kyla, a teacher and

district professional development chair, believes comics enable teachers to reflect on their own practice in the context of mentorship. Kyla describes:

> Comics are a very accessible way to tell true stories of new teachers. They invite people in. They communicate the message so powerfully. They help teachers see other teachers in different contexts of teaching, which may help teachers to see themselves reflected in others' stories more, rather than if you just gave them a written description of the program. Then they might be more likely to sign-up or seek out mentoring programs in their districts (Kyla, personal communication, July, 2016).

Entering and Provoking Conversation through Comics

The potential of comics invites both reflection and dialogue in the context of teacher development. Portraying new teachers' stories through comics offers "a synergy between visual and text; the interplay between the two provides opportunities for fostering deeper understanding that flows in between the pages" (Devon, personal communication, July, 2016). We consider teachers' exchange of stories about their professional practice as an act of reflection that further invites the reader's reflection. Teachers' comics as visual narratives offer dynamic and personalized stories that differ from the generalization or assumption of the lives of early career teachers. It provides opportunities for teachers to examine their practice and communicate with each other, permitting teachers to "think aloud in the company of colleagues" (Jalongo & Isenberg, 1995, p. 88). Furthermore, reflection stimulates dialogue; in a sense teachers' visual narratives act as a provocation for inquiry into rethinking teachers' practice in relation to a culture of collaboration in professional learning communities (Grosz, 1995; Honan, 2007). Lisa, a school principal and a mentorship steering committee member describes how comics help initiate conversation in her district's mentoring workshops:

> There is not much time to delve into a lot of text materials during our mentoring training sessions. The comics have been effective in communicating ideas and providing real examples to our teachers – almost feel like a soundboard for teachers' reflection and for our group conversation. One of the comics is a first year teacher's journey in our district; it provides a quick snapshot into how this new teacher got through the year with the support from a mentor. We used this comic in our training session to discuss the role of a mentor and the relationship between the mentor and the mentee. Our teachers responded to it very well because they understand the isolation and challenges described in that story (Lisa, personal communication, July, 2016).

Responding to the implication of comics in teacher mentorship, Devon refers to our infographics work (Figures 9 & 10) and suggests, "comics could be a useful tool for exploring our assumptions and our understandings (personal communication, July, 2016)." She further explains,

> When you work with mentors and new teachers about the potential benefits of the work we do together, you need to have the conversation to establish the shared values. This infographic, which summarized the benefits of mentorship in two pages, can be a good tool to stimulate such a conversation. It's personalized and authentic. Interesting that comics is a medium that has not been taken seriously in our culture in the past. However, in the context of teacher mentorship, it allows a bit of space and playfulness for the conversation that can sometimes be about very serious issues (Devon, personal communication, July, 2016).

PRESS
THIS IS YOUR INTREPID REPORTER FLIP CHART AND TODAY I'M ASKING EDUCATIONAL PROFESSIONALS THIS QUESTION:
WHY IS TEACHER MENTORSHIP ESSENTIAL TO THE SCHOOL COMMUNITY?
SD: 60, PEACE RIVER NORTH
MENTORSHIP IS KEY IN NORTHERN REGIONS BECAUSE OF GEOGRAPHIC ISOLATION.
SD: 20, KOOTENAY-COLUMBIA
IT BUILDS A CULTURE OF COLLABORATION AND CARE.
SD: 83, NORTH OKANAGAN-SHUSWAP
BUILDS CONFIDENCE...
CREATES A SAFE, INTIMATE ENVIRONMENT TO SHARE IDEAS.
SD: 59, PEACE RIVER SOUTH
IT CREATES THE SPACE FOR SOMEONE TO BECOME THEIR BEST SELF AS AN EDUCATOR.
SD: 19, REVELSTOKE
IT FORMALIZES PROFESSIONAL DISCUSSION IN A NATURAL WAY.
Superintendent, Mike Hooker
SD: 87, STIKINE
A WAY FOR PEOPLE TO COME TOGETHER AND HAVE PROFESSIONAL CONVERSATIONS.
Superintendent, Mike Gordon
GLEN HANSMAN, PRESIDENT OF THE BC TEACHERS' FEDERATION
CONNECTIONS BETWEEN TEACHERS ULTIMATELY LEADS TO BETTER SUCCESS FOR STUDENTS.
SD: 50, HAIDA GWAII
MENTORSHIP BRINGS OUT THE BEST IN OURSELVES WHEN WE'RE ASKED TO SUPPORT SOMEONE ELSE IN A DIRECT WAY.
IT HELPS CREATE MEANINGFUL EXPERIENCES FOR STUDENTS.

Fig. 9. Page 1 of Infographic

SD: 37, DELTA
IT'S AN OPPORTUNITY FOR TEACHERS TO CONTINUE LEARNING.
MENTORSHIP CREATES A LEARNING COMMUNITY.
SD: 73, KAMLOOPS/THOMPSON
IT PROVIDES TOOLS AND SUPPORT FOR HERE-AND-NOW PROBLEMS.
IT ESTABLISHES A FRAMEWORK AND CULTURE OF LONG-TERM PROFESSIONAL GROWTH.
CREATES AN ATTITUDE OF STRIVING FOR PROFESSIONAL EXCELLENCE.
SD: 62, SOOKE
DON'T KNOW HOW I WOULD HAVE SURVIVED WITHOUT IT.
SD: 47, POWELL RIVER
MENTORSHIP IS ABOUT HELPING NEW TEACHERS FIND THEIR OWN WAY.
THERE YOU HAVE IT FOLKS...
MENTORSHIP IS GOOD FOR YOU!
This infographic is part of a body of work of a research project entitled: Pedagogical Assemblage: building and sustaining teacher capacity though mentoring programs in British Columbia (2014-2017). This research builds on the New Teacher Mentoring Project (NTMP) that brings together the shared interests of UBC, BCTF, BCSSA and the British Columbia Ministry of Education to create systemic support and strategies aimed at cultivating and transforming educational excellence through teacher mentorship.
For more information, contact Dr. Rita Irwin rita.irwin@ubc.ca or visit mentoringbc.ca
UBC
BRITISH COLUMBIA
Ministry of Education
BCSSA
Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada
Conseil de recherches en sciences humaines du Canada
Canada

Fig. 10. Page 2 of Infographic

Unexpectedly, one of the comics led to a mentor's joy of being appreciated. Laura is a program coordinator who read our comics and then connected us to Jenni, a new teacher in her district. Laura shares Jenni's mentor's response after reading Jenni's comic story:

> Jenni's mentor told me that she was deeply moved by how Jenni described the impact that she had, and in fact, it brought her to tears. The mentor also told me that she felt so honoured that she had played this type of role in somebody's life that she was so excited to share this comic with her parents, who were retired teachers, to say: look at what somebody said

> about the impact that I've had on her teaching career (Laura, personal communication, July, 2016).

Conversations around the comics help validate the fact that teachers' professional relationships can have an impact on their practice, as well as outline the benefits of the mentoring program. Laura puts it, "As a program coordinator, Jenni's comic is validating to think what the program could offer to make a difference for teachers" (personal communication, July, 2016).

As Gergen and Gergen (1988) suggest, "the telling of the story is not so much the act of an independent individual as a result of a mutually coordinated and supportive relationship" (p. 40). Furthermore, narrative is "a product of relationships" (p. 41), whereby we witness comics not only as a language that understands individuality, but also a mode of inquiry into teachers' collective stories of challenges and professional growth that situate reciprocal relationship building among professionals who are engaged in practice together. As Devon, a district mentoring program coordinator describes,

> I think it's neat to witness how comics can harness the power of the narrative. Through this sort of mosaic of comics, we have seen a rich collection of various teacher narratives that highlight the diversity of our province, as well as lived experiences in the teaching profession. (Devon, personal communication, July, 2016).

Such an inquiry, through comics as teachers' visual narratives, invites teachers to experience imaginative insight into new teachers' stories, to reflect on their own experience of becoming teachers, to provoke conversation around educational issues, and to articulate the complexity of pedagogical relationships among teachers and their professional learning communities.

Final Remarks

Our use of an a/r/tography informed methodology in teacher mentorship offers an alterative way of mobilizing research knowledge by provoking artful representation in articulating the complexity of teacher practice and by demonstrating the potential of comics to illustrate particular insights in the study of educational phenomena. Our experience with the *Pedagogical Assemblage* research project strengthens our belief that comics can promote knowledge construction by sharing stories of teachers' professional development in ways that are playful, inviting and validating. Through our research methods, we have witnessed the potential of comics to promote and strengthen teachers'

professional growth through community building, and by engaging audiences to effectively link ideas and actions through multimodal representations within collaborative exchanges of knowledge. Thus the teachers' various sequential narratives create a sense of community that unite teachers, and further encourage reflection and dialogue. The comics created for *Pedagogical Assemblage* blend cartooning's innate empathy with the values of progressive educational curriculum. As a result, our motivation to employ comics as research outputs is built upon "the necessity of a methodology being practice, process, and product" (Sinner, Leggo, Irwin, Gouzouasis, & Grauer, 2006, p. 1225) whereby the product of a reflective practice and collaborative process generate products (in this instance comics) that attempt to form a broader communicative whole.

References

Anderson, D., & Thomas, P. T. (2014). 'Prospecting for metacognition' in a science museum: A metaphor reflecting hermeneutic inquiry. *Issues in Educational Research, 24*(1), 1-20.

Andre, J. (1965). Esthetique des bandes dessinees. *Revue d'Esthetique, 18*, 49-71.

Ayers, W., & Alexander-Tanner, R. (2010). *To teach: The journey, in comics*. Teachers College Press.

Baetens, J. (2013). Learning from comics (and bart beaty): On the institutionalization of comics. *Interférences Littéraires-Literaire Interferenties, 11*, 179-188.

Bahl, E. K. (2015). Comics and scholarship: Sketching the possibilities. *Composition Studies, 43*(1), 178.

Beaty, B. (2011). *Comics v, art.* Rutgers University Press.

Beaty, B. (2015). *Twelve-cent archie.* Rutgers University Press.

Beaty, B., Woo, B., & SpringerLINK ebooks - Literature, Cultural & Media Studies. (2016). *The greatest comic book of all time: Symbolic capital and the field of american comic books*. Basingstoke;Secaucus;: Palgrave Pivot [Imprint]. doi:10.1057/978-1-137-53162-9

Bitz, M. (2004). The comic book project: Forging alternative pathways to literacy. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy, 47*(7), 574-586.

Bitz, M. (2009). *Manga high.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press

Bitz, M. (2010). *When commas meet kryptonite: Classroom lessons from the comic book project. language and literacy series.* Teachers College Press.

Bitz, M., & Emejulu, O. (2015). Creating comic books in nigeria: International reflections on literacy, creativity, and student engagement. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy.* DOI: 10.1002/jaal.451

Breault, D. & Marshall, J. (2010). Curriculum, definitions of. In C. Kridel (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of curriculum studies* (pp. 179-181). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications Ltd. doi: 10.4135/9781412958806.n103

Brunetti, I. (2011). *Cartooning: Philosophy and practice*. New Haven [Conn.]: Yale University Press.

Cixous, H., & Clément, C. (1986). *The newly born woman*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Clandinin, D. J., & Connelly, F. M. (1998). Asking questions about telling stories. In C. Kridel (Ed.), *Writing educational biography: Explorations in qualitative research* (pp. 245–253). New York, NY: Garland.

Clandinin, D. J. (Ed.). (2006). *Handbook of narrative inquiry: Mapping a methodology*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Cohn, N. (2016). *The visual narrative reader*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic.

Collins, J., & Blot, R. K. (2003). *Literacy and literacies: Texts, power, and identity* (No. 22). Cambridge University Press.

Cortazzi, M. (2014). *Narrative analysis*. New York: Routledge.

Dorrell, L. D.B. Curtis; K.R. Rampal (1995). Book-Worms Without Books? Students Reading Comic Books in the School House. *The Journal of Popular Culture 29* (2) 223–234. Doi:10.1111/j.0022-3840.1995.2902_223.x

Ellsworth, E. (2005). *Places of learning: Media, architecture, pedagogy*. New York: Routledge.

Estren, M. J. (1974). *A history of underground comics*. San Francisco: Straight Arrow Books.

Foucault, M. (1998). *Aesthetics, method, and epistemology: Volume II*. New-York: The New Press.

Frank, J. (1949). What's in the comics? *Journal of Educational Sociology, 18*(4), 214-222

Fresnault-Deruelle, P. (1972). *La bande dessinée: L'univers et les techniques de quelques "comics" d'expression française*. Paris: Hachette.

Gergen, K., & Gergen, M. (1988). Narrative and the self as relationship. In L. Berkowitz (Ed.), *Advances in experimental social psychology, Vol. 21* (pp.17-56). New York: Academic Press.

Goldstein, L., & Phelan, M. (2009). Are you there god? it's me, manga: Manga as an extension of young adult literature. *Young Adult Library Services, 7*(4), 32-38.

Goldweber, D. (2013). Underground Comics. In T. Riggs (Ed.), *St. James Encyclopedia of Popular Culture* (2nd ed., Vol. 5, pp. 203-204). Detroit: St. James Press. Retrieved from http://go.galegroup.com.ezproxy.library.ubc.ca/ps/i.do?p=GVRL&sw=w&u=ubcolumbia&v=2.1&it=r&id=GALE%7CCX2735802806&sid=summon&asid=6252131f6c528bbcc548c5695f393dc5

Groensteen, T., & Ebrary Academic Complete (Canada) Subscription Collection. (2007). *The system of comics* (1st ed.). Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.

Groensteen, T. (2008). A few words about the system of comics and more. *European Comic Art, 1*(1), 87-93. doi:10.3828/eca.1.1.6

Groensteen, T. (2012). The current state of French comics theory. *Scandinavian Journal of Comic Art, 1*(1), 112-122.

Groensteen, T. (2013). *Comics and narration*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.

Grosz, E. (1995). *Space, time and perversion*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin.

Hergé. (2007). *The adventures of tintin, reporter for le petit Vingtième-- in the land of the soviets* (US; 1st pbk. ed.). New York: Little, Brown and Co.

Honan, E. (2007). Writing a rhizome: An (im)plausible methodology. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education, 20*(5), 531-546.

Horsman, Y. (2015). The rise of comic studies. *Oxford Art Journal*, pp. 148-152.

Huebner, D., E., Pinar, W. F., & Hillis, V. (1999). *The lure of the transcendent: Collected essays by dwayne E. huebner*. Mahwah, N.J: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Irwin, R. (2004.) A/r/tography: A Metonymic Métissage. In Rita L. Irwin & Alex de Cosson (Eds). *A/r/tography: Rendering self through arts-based living inquiry (pp. 27-40).* Vancouver, BC: Pacific Educational Press.

Irwin, R., & Springgay, S. (2008). A/r/tography as Practice Based Research. In M. Cahnmann & R. Siegesmund (Eds.). *Arts-based research in education: Foundations for practice* (pp. 103-124). New York: Routledge.

Irwin, R. (2010). A/r/tography. In Kridel, C. A., & SAGE Reference Online Encyclopedias. *Encyclopedia of curriculum studies.* Thousand Oaks, Calif: SAGE Publications. (pp 42-43). doi: http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.library.ubc.ca/10.4135/9781412958806.n23

Jalongo, M., & Isenberg, J. (1995). *Teachers' stories: From personal narrative to professional insight.* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Kraver, J. (2013). Reinventing the Composition Classroom, or How Making Comics Can Clarify the Composing Process. *SANE journal: Sequential Art Narrative in Education*, *1*(3), 4.

Kutsyuruba, J. (2012). Teacher induction and mentorship policies: the pan-Canadian overview. *International Journal of Mentoring and Coaching in Education, 1*(3), 235 – 256.

Kutsyuruba, B., Godden, L., Matheson, I., & Walker, K. (2016). *A pan-Canadian document analysis study: Understanding the role of teacher induction and mentoring programs in teacher attrition and retention.* Queen's University. https://earlycareerteachersdotcom.files.wordpress.com/2016/04/final-report-sept-201616.pdf

Lin, C., Lawrence, J., & Irwin, R. (2016). Changing notions of teacher mentorship in British Columbia. *The Canadian Association of Principals Journal.* Fall issue, 44-47

Lim, F. V. (2004). Developing an integrative multi-semiotic model. In O'Halloran, K. (Ed.) *Open Linguistics : Multimodal Discourse Analysis : Systemic Functional Perspectives* (pp. 220-246). London, GB: Continuum. Retrieved from http://www.ebrary.com

Lim, F. V. (2007). The visual semantics stratum: Making meaning in sequential images. In T. D. Royce & , W. L. Bowcher (Eds.), *New directions in the analysis of multimodal discourse* (pp. 195-212). Mahwah, N.J: L. Erlbaum Associates.

Madrid-Manrique, M. (2015). *Creating audiovisual participatory narratives: A/r/tography and inclusivity*. Retrieved from: http://issuu.com/martamm

Makey, H.O. (1952). Comic books - a challenge. *The English Journal, 41*(10), 547-549.

McCloud, S. (1994). *Understanding comics* (1st HarperPerennial ed.). New York: HarperPerennial.

Miller, A. (2007). *Reading bande dessinee: Critical approaches to french-language comic strip*. GB: Intellect Books.

Miller, A., & Beaty, B. (2014). *The french comics theory reader*. Leuven, Belgium: Leuven University Press.

Morrison, T. G., Bryan, G., & Chilcoat, G. W. (2002). Using student-generated comic books in the classroom: Designing their own comic books can help students develop their writing, comprehension, and research skills. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy, 45*(8), 758.

Noddings, N. (1991). Stories in dialogue. In C. Witherell and N. Noddings (Eds.), *Stories lives tell: Narrative and dialogue in education* (pp. 157-170). New York: Teacher College Press.

Pinar, W. F. (1975). Currere: toward reconceptualization. *Curriculum theorizing: The reconceptualists*, 396-414.

Pratt, H. J. (2009). Medium specificity and the ethics of narrative in comics. *Storyworlds: A Journal of Narrative Studies, 1*(1), 97-113. doi:10.1353/stw.0.0010

Rippl, G., & Etter, L. (2013). Intermediality, Transmediality, and Graphic Narrative. *From Comic Strips to Graphic Novels: Contributions to the Theory and History of Graphic Narrative, Berlin: De Gruyter*, 191-218.

Roux, A. (1970). *La bande dessinée peut être éducative*. Paris: l'École.

Sachs, J. (2003). *The activist teaching profession*. Philadelphia, PA: Open University Press.

Satrapi, M. (2007). *The complete persepolis* (1st ed.). New York: Pantheon Books.

Sellers, S. (1996). *Hélène cixous: Authorship, autobiography, and love*. Cambridge, MA; Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.

Sinner, A., Leggo, C., Irwin, R. L., Gouzouasis, P., & Grauer, K. (2006). Arts-based educational research dissertations: Reviewing the practices of new scholars. *Canadian Journal of Education, 29*(4), 1223.

Smolderen, T., & Ebrary Academic Complete (Canada) Subscription Collection. (2014). *The origins of comics: From william hogarth to winsor McCay*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi. doi:10.14325/mississippi/9781617031496.001.0001

Sones, W. W. D. (1944). The comics and instructional method. *Journal of Educational Sociology (American Sociological Association), 18*(4), 232–240.

Sousanis, W. N. (2015). *Unflattening: A visual-verbal inquiry into learning in many dimensions.* Cambridge; London: Harvard University Press

Spiegelman, A. (2011). *Metamaus.* New York, NY: Pantheon Books.

Sturm, J., K., & Bennett, M. (2014). *The world is made of cheese: The applied cartooning manifesto.* Vermont: The Center for Cartoon Studies.

Syma, C. K., & Weiner, R. G. (2013). *Graphic novels and comics in the classroom: Essays on the educational power of sequential art.* Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers.

Taylor, J. (2013). From 'or' to 'and': L'ecriture feminine as a methodological approach for fine art research: Part of the 'practice makes perfect' forum on practice-based research. *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education,* doi:10.1177/1474022213514554

Tilley, C. L. (2012). Seducing the innocent: Fredric wertham and the falsifications that helped condemn comics. *Information & Culture: A Journal of History, 47*(4), 383-413. doi:10.7560/IC47401

Tilley, C. L. (2014). Comics: A once-missed opportunity. *The Journal of Research on Libraries and Young Adults.* Retrieved from: http://www.yalsa.ala.org/jrlya/2014/05/comics-a-once-missed-opportunity/#more-208

Wertham, F. (1954). *Seduction of the innocent.* New York: Rinehart.

Uidhr, C. M. (2012). Comics and collective authorship. In A. Meskin & R.T. Cook (Eds.), *The Art of Comics: A Philosophical Approach* (pp. 47-67). Chichester: John Wiley & Sons.

Whitlock, G. (2006). Autographics: The seeing "I" of the comics. *MFS Modern Fiction Studies, 52*(4), 965-979. doi:10.1353/mfs.2007.0013

Williams, R. M. (2008). Image, text, and story: Comics and graphic novels in the classroom. *Art Education, 61*(6), 13-19.

Zorbaugh, H. (1944). The Comics as an Educational Medium. *Journal of Educational Sociology, 18*(4), 193-194.

SANE journal: Sequential Art Narrative in Education

Volume 2 | Issue 2 Article 4

4-12-2017

Review of Captain Marvel and the Art of Nostalgia, by Brian Cremins

Sean Kleefeld
Independent Comics Scholar, sean@seankleefeld.com

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/sane

Part of the American Literature Commons, American Popular Culture Commons, Art Education Commons, Comparative Literature Commons, Creative Writing Commons, Curriculum and Instruction Commons, Educational Assessment, Evaluation, and Research Commons, Educational Methods Commons, Educational Psychology Commons, Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons, Higher Education Commons, Illustration Commons, Interdisciplinary Arts and Media Commons, Rhetoric and Composition Commons, and the Visual Studies Commons

Recommended Citation
Kleefeld, Sean (2017) "Review of Captain Marvel and the Art of Nostalgia, by Brian Cremins," *SANE journal: Sequential Art Narrative in Education*: Vol. 2 : Iss. 2 , Article 4.
Available at: http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/sane/vol2/iss2/4

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in SANE journal: Sequential Art Narrative in Education by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Captain Marvel fascinates and inspires study for a variety of reasons, but one in particular has been the radical change in his popularity over the decades. In his heydey, his comics outsold Superman's, and his magical incantation "Shazam!" entered into the English lexicon. And yet, over the years, the character's popularity diminished to the point where more people knew the name "Shazam" from *Gomer Pyle* re-runs than from the comics that introduced the word. So in his recent book *Captain Marvel and the Art of Nostalgia*, Brian Cremins' focus on not only Captain Marvel but specifically how nostalgia is tied to the character makes for a particularly interesting study.

Cremins limits his focus primarily to the comic stories by Captain Marvel's primary creators from the Golden Age: C.C. Beck and Otto Binder. This of course makes the subject more manageable by avoiding later comic interpretations of the character, as well as those in other media, but much of the fondness many readers have for the the Marvel Family stems directly from what Beck and Binder laid out in those early stories. Further, Beck was fairly prolific in writing about his thoughts and experiences working on Captain Marvel, and Cremins frequently uses those pieces to expand upon or further highlight ideas seen in the comics themselves.

Rather than trying to encapsulate the full breadth of Captain Marvel stories, Cremins pulls out only a handful of individual comic stories to highlight and use as examples. By using just a few prime pieces, he's able to more deeply illustrate the points he's making, reinforcing them further with quotes from Beck (most frequently), Binder, and a host of others that were either associated with the comic itself or were part of Beck's "Critical Circle."

Cremins starts with a chapter each on Beck and Binder, applying Beck's thoughts on visual storytelling back to Captain Marvel's origin story and Binder's struggles as a freelance writer as they're explored through Mr. Tawny. The next two chapters address the complexities of telling simple, charming stories against the backdrop of the ugly realities of the times, in particular, how an upstanding, all-powerful hero like Captain Marvel fits in with the grim challenges of World War II and Adolf Hitler; and how depictions of race through the rarely mentioned character of Steamboat in a time before the Civil Rights movement. Cremins closes the book by bringing us forward beyond the years of Captain Marvel's original publication run, and how and why the character became something of a staple in fanzine circles as fans began waxing nostalgic for him in the 1960s and '70s.

Despite being written with an academic mindset, Cremins writes approachably. While not casual, his writing's easy style makes the book smooth and enjoyable. He walks through each story example slowly, occasionally stepping out for some germaine anecdotes before circling back. While there is some danger in wandering too far afield during these instances, Cremins never seems to stray overmuch and brings readers back into the story before they've lost sight of his primary point.

The book includes a number of reproductions from the comics to emphasize Cremins' writing. These are most welcome, of course, but almost unnecessary in many cases, as the text itself describes the pages and panels in question. Readers who are either unfamiliar with the Captain Marvel stable of characters, or ignorant of illustration and storytelling terms, should have no difficulty following along, thanks to the specific panels chosen to accompany the text. And though Cremins provides something of a caveat up front about obtaining images from deteriorating, decades-old comics, the scans all come across very well despite being black and white reproductions of color comics.

Many books of this type examine the heroes from the perspective of a fan. While Cremins does cite himself as one, he's here able mostly to remove himself from that viewpoint and not only present his subject fairly objectively, but also address the very nature of the fandom the character has inspired. Cremins doesn't hesitate to bring up flaws in the concept or the creators themselves, but accepts them as part of the whole, while also pointing out where improvements can be/were made.

Captain Marvel has, in many iterations, seemed somewhat out of place relative to other contemporary comic characters. While he does not hold the popular attention of youth as he did back in the 1940s, by addressing the character, his creators, and the sense of nostalgia he seems to invoke, Cremins makes some solid arguments why that pull remains strong in the 21st century.

SANE *journal*

sequential art narrative in education

2.2